

adult Battlestar

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O R A N G E ?

Blue One

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BLUE ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

This issue of "Purple and Orange?" requires a small amount of explanation. During the first year or so of our existence, many people asked if we ever planned to publish what they defined as a "blue" issue. We said, again and again, that, yes, one day we'd do one -- but we never said when. Finally, pinned down by several writers, we said we'd print the issue if we ever received six "blue" stories for it.

The six stories presented in this issue are only a beginning -- there are more than a dozen others waiting in our files. It has been suggested that we print a "blue" issue after every seven regular ones. Seven? Well, there are precedents...

Therefore, if response to what we have named "Blue One" is favourable, we will be printing "Son of Blue" following our fourteenth issue, which (assuming we follow our present schedule) should appear late in 1982.

As for the stories themselves:

"The Sin of the Father," by our professional friend "John Jones IX," introduces Major Dion, a new member of the OSIRIS crew. We think you'll agree it is an excellent story -- whatever its colour -- and it may well appear in a regular issue of "Purple and Orange?" at some future time.

"Gift of the Gods," one of several stories submitted by Marj Ihssen, tells something of the relationship between Captain Apollo and Lieutenant Reisa, a Vandusian refugee he met about the time Sheba died. (We'll tell you about that in our upcoming special issue, "Apollo's Odyssey," which will be available at Minnicon, Easter weekend in Minneapolis.)

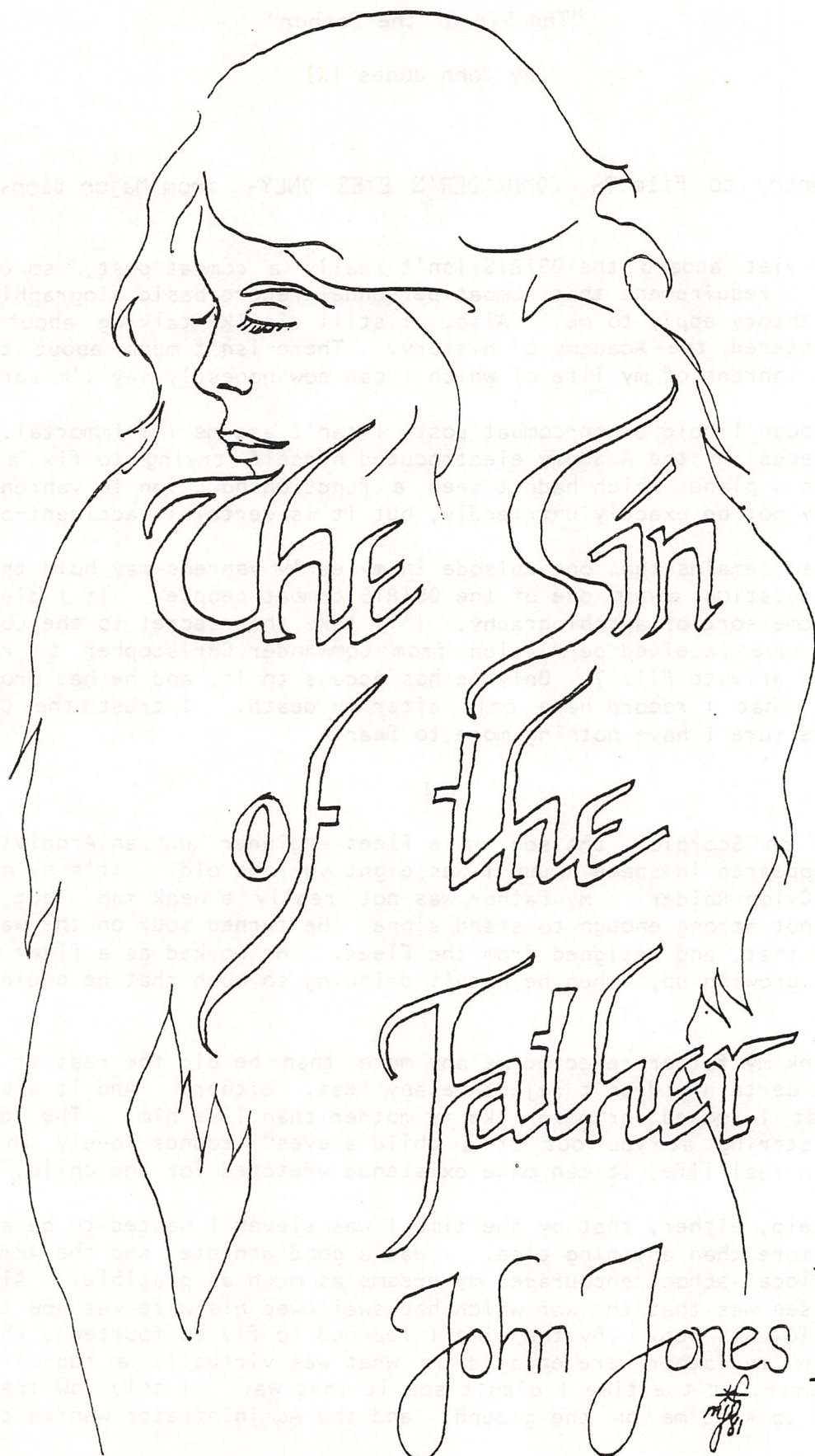
"Ladies of the Evening" is another story by the talented Sharon Monroe, and it tells us something more of the past of one Flight Sergeant Alexandra. But Alexandra and Starbuck? We wonder how the Caprican Academy managed to survive.

"Vengeance Is Mine, Sayeth the Colonel" is another OSIRIS story, this time by N. J. Burridge. The Colonel in question is Arsenaux, Executive Officer of the OSIRIS. As for why he seeks vengeance, well, you'll have to read the story!

"Circumstances Require..." is Anne Cecil's contribution to our first venture into "blue" fiction. What happens when a former socialator is placed in a position where her old talents provide the only obvious hope of rescue? And what will Starbuck think? Anne has quite an answer...

"Star-Crossed Lovers" is our final story, written by a member of a professional writers' workshop who chooses to write under the name "Tawny Meteor." The reason for the nom de plume will quickly become obvious. The puns -- and they are numerous -- are only as X-rated as the reader's mind.

So, without further comment, we herewith present "Purple and Orange? -- Blue One." We hope you, our readers, enjoy it. And we hope you will write us and let us know; writers, artists, and editors all thrive on praise -- and we hope we are all capable of learning from criticism. Pleasant reading!



"The Sin of the Father"

(By John Jones IX)

{Personal entry to File 7, COMMANDER'S EYES ONLY, from Major Dion, Second Archivist}

Second Archivist aboard the OSIRIS isn't really a combat post, so Commander Christopher's requirement that combat personnel record basic biographical data doesn't in theory apply to me. Also, I still dislike talking about my life before I entered the Academy of History. There isn't much about the first twenty-five yahrens of my life of which I can now honestly say I'm very proud.

Yet even though I hold a non-combat post, I can't assume I'm immortal. One of my best friends in the Academy electrocuted herself trying to fix a washing machine, on a planet which hadn't seen a functioning Cylon in yahrens. The universe may not be exactly unfriendly, but it is certainly accident-prone.

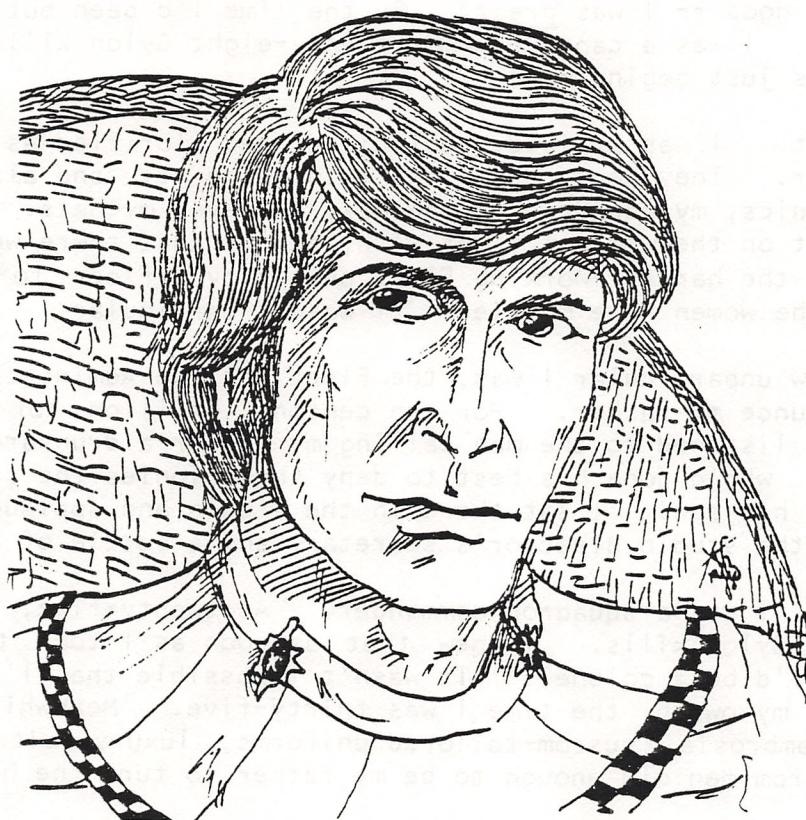
The fact also remains that one episode in my early yahrens may hold the answer to a vital question about one of the OSIRIS combat people. If I die without recording some sort of autobiography, I'll take that secret to the Lords with me. So I have received permission from Commander Christopher to record my story in his private File 7. Only he has access to it, and he has promised he will reveal what I record here only after my death. I trust the Commander enough to be sure I have nothing more to fear.

I

I was born on Scorpio, the son of a Fleet engineer and an Archivist. My mother disappeared in space when I was eight yahrens old. It's my guess her ship met a Cylon Raider. My father was not really a weak man, but he definitely was not strong enough to stand alone. He turned sour on the war and on space after that, and resigned from the Fleet. He worked as a flyer mechanic while I was growing up, when he wasn't drinking so much that he couldn't work at all.

I don't think my father rejected me any more than he did the rest of the universe. He certainly didn't reject me any less, either. And it didn't help matters that I looked far more like my mother than like him. The idea of a "lost love staring at you out of a child's eyes" sounds lovely in the romances. In real life, it can make existence wretched for the child.

It didn't help, either, that by the time I was eleven I wanted to be a Colonial Warrior more than anything else. I was a good athlete, and the Administrator of our local school encouraged my dreams as much as possible. All my father could see was that the war which had swallowed his wife was now threatening to swallow his son. By the time I learned to fly at fourteen, the Administrator and my father were engaged in what was virtually a tug-of-war over me. Of course, at the time I didn't see it that way. I only saw that my father wanted to keep me on the ground, and the Administrator wanted to let me



fly. Do I need to say whose side I was on?

Matters came to a head when I applied for the Colonial Academy at seventeen. For about a yahren, my father had been drinking more and earning less than ever. Now he became so outspoken about my going to the Academy and against the war in general that he was arrested on a charge of "political unreliability." I've always suspected the Administrator denounced him, but could never prove it. The man is surely dead now, in any case, and at the time I would have been on his side.

So my father was arrested, and spent the yahrens I was at the Academy in a labour camp. By the time I graduated, he was out on parole, but so broken in health and spirit that he had to work as a casual labourer. I didn't care; I had the Twelve Colonies by the tail.

Those were the early days of the one-man fighters. Both we and the Cylons were learning a lot, and it took a wider range of skills to be a first-class fighter pilot than it does now. If any of my old squadron-mates could come back to life and try flying a Viper, most of them would probably call it an easy job. They wouldn't necessarily be right; the best Viper pilots would be at home in any fighter I've ever flown. On the other hand, they certainly aren't in nearly as much danger from their own equipment as they are from the Cylons. We were.

I had everything it takes to make a good fighter pilot. My reflexes, coordination, and eyesight were superb, my mathematical and analytical skills superior, my mechanical aptitude more than adequate, my aggressiveness outstanding.

I was more than good -- I was great. By the time I'd been out of the Academy for two yahrens, I was a captain with twenty-eight Cylon kills to my credit, and I knew I was just beginning.

So did the Fleet. I was praised, publicised, and glorified as the ideal of a Colonial Warrior. They kept the light shining on me, and also on my wingmates, my mechanics, my squadron commanders, and even my pets. They'd probably have shone it on the women I slept with, except that there were too many of those for even the hardest-working Fleet publicity officer to keep track of. Also, some of the women were married. I wasn't particular.

Just to show how unparticular I was, the Fleet got the Administrator of my old school to denounce my father. For ten centons, millions of people on all Twelve Colonies listened to the man calling my father a drunkard, a weakling, a near-traitor, who'd done his best to deny the Colonies the services of this mighty Warrior, his son! I sat there in the studio and applauded, then spent the night with the studio director's secretary and a bottle of ambrosia.

At twenty-four, I was a squadron commander. At twenty-five, I was a major, with sixty-five Cylon kills. I knew that as soon as I took the Command and Staff courses, I'd be a colonel. It wasn't impossible that I'd be commanding a battlestar of my own by the time I was thirty-five. Meanwhile, there were enough women, ambrosia, custom-tailored uniforms, luxury suites, interviews, and deference from men old enough to be my father to turn the heads of any six fighter pilots.

Then, a few days short of my twenty-sixth birthday, it all came to an end.

I was chasing four Cylons all by myself, as careless of the odds or of where my wingman had gone as ever. I picked off three as easily as always -- kills seventy-six, seventy-seven, and seventy-eight. The last Cylon turned into me, apparently trying to take me with him. I blew him up at such close range that I took a lot of debris in my own cockpit and hull. My wingman wasn't close enough to see what happened after that. Fortunately, he was close enough to pick me out of the wrecked fighter before I died from lack of oxygen.

When I woke up, it was three sections later. I was in the hospital with head injuries, extensive burns, multiple fractures, and lacerations -- enough injuries to kill any six fighter pilots. It was another section before they'd even tell me how I was, and two more before they'd let me look in a mirror. The plastic surgeons were honest people; they knew it wouldn't help me to know I'd need a miracle.

They still performed one, in spite of my temper tantrums. By the time they were finished, I was quite presentable as long as I kept my clothes on. The rest of the injuries were also healing nicely, except for one which to most people would hardly have been an injury at all. My brain was affected -- not enough to disable me, but more than enough to turn an extraordinary set of reflexes into an ordinary one.

I wasn't most people. I lived by those superhuman reflexes, and I lived for the fame they brought me at the controls of a fighter. At least the Fleet publicity people waited until I was out of the hospital before breaking the news that the ride was over. I could have all the medals and bonuses I

wanted, but I had to get out of the Fleet. If I couldn't be their blue-ribbon bull any more, they didn't want me around at all.

A Captain Eleazar risked her career by explaining the situation in detail. The war had reached an awkward stage for the Colonial government. It wasn't going badly enough to make everyone rally around the leadership in a fine flush of patriotic enthusiasm. At the same time, it wasn't going well enough to give everyone the thrill of victory. It had to be made interesting, and one way to make war interesting has always been to find heroes. Fleet publicity found me, and as long as I was ideally qualified for the job of hero, the rule was, "Nothing's too good for Major Dion." Now, I wasn't a hero any more. In fact, I was a living reminder of how anybody's son or daughter could end up if they flew with the Colonial Warriors.

I'll never be able to thank Captain Eleazar enough for what she did. I can only hope she didn't suffer for it. If she hadn't been honest with me, I think I might have killed myself. As it was, about all that kept me from drinking myself to death was the memory of my father's weakness and the determination that I would, by the Lords, do better than he had!

After about a yahren, I added up my money. With my bonuses, my pension, and the sale of a lot of things I knew I'd never need again, I wasn't poor. I bought myself a weather-proof cabin, airlifted it to a clearing in the forest at the foot of the Gryphon Mountains on Taura, and settled in. I had a small flyer, and once a sectar I flew to the nearest town to pick up supplies and my pension units. Other than this, I kept completely to myself.

II

The foothills of the Gryphons were virgin wilderness then. They probably still are -- either that, or radioactive cinders. The Cylons have no aesthetic sense, and either ignore natural scenery or, if they think it hides a military target, destroy it.

So I was as alone as I wanted to be, and the solitude, the smell of the forest, the birdsongs in the morning, and the ripple of the stream at night all started draining some of the pain out of me. I'd always been interested in history, and now I had time to read all the history books I missed while chasing Cylons, medals, and women. I could sit on the bank of the stream, catch spotfish, and broil them for dinner. I could even go around without all my clothes on, for the first time since I got out of the hospital. No one in the forest would flinch at my scars, or try so hard not to flinch that I couldn't help noticing it.

As the spring turned into summer, I spent most of my time outdoors, and most of my time outdoors naked except for a pair of sandals. I discovered that as I tanned, some of the scars faded. I still didn't suppose any woman would ever get close to me again unless she was paid for it, but a little of my old vanity was coming back.

It was just after dawn of what was going to be a hot day. I was sitting on my favourite boulder, and I'd just cast my line clear across the little pool below the boulder. From the lower end of the pool, the stream ran deep and slow off into the forest. I never had the curiosity to follow and see where it

finally went.

I started reeling in my line, then a splash made me look up. A small, dripping face framed in the most incredible red hair I'd ever seen popped to the surface. For a moment I was only startled, wondering if I'd caught a water-sprite. Then I felt angry at having my solitude broken and my scars exposed.

"Who are you, the Cylons take you?"

The red hair vanished, then popped to the surface halfway across the pool toward me. "My name is Scylla," she said. Her voice was very clear, and I recognised a Caprican accent. "You're Major Dion, who used to fly from the GALACTICA, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?" I snarled. "By these?" I gestured to my scars, then stood up. "Well, if you've come to gape at them..."

For a second time, Scylla disappeared. When she came to the surface, I could see she was standing on the bottom. Her neck and shoulders were out of the water now, white and gleaming, while her hair floated around her. Then she laughed.

My anger bubbled up inside me like lava in a volcano. I said something obscene and started looking for a rock to throw at her.

Then she shook her head and looked contrite. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you. But you looked so funny, standing there with nothing on except a look as if you wanted me to be a Cylon so you could throw something at me with a clear conscience."

I sat down abruptly. I don't like having women reading my mind, except when it saves me the trouble of propositioning them. For a moment, I couldn't have said a word to save my life. Then I managed to smile.

"All right. I won't be a lout. But would you mind turning your back while I go get some clothes on?"

"Would you get me a towel while you're at it?" she asked.

I got up, took two steps, then stopped in the middle of the third so I nearly fell on my face. Scylla was walking toward the bank, rising out of the water as she came, and she was completely nude.

I don't suppose it should really have surprised me to discover she'd been swimming in her skin. But she was a beautiful woman, and somehow I'd assumed no beautiful woman would ever be nude in my presence again. It seemed to me that beautiful women and I would be in separate dimensions for the rest of my life.

Yet here was Scylla, coming toward me in what she'd worn on the day of her birth. And she was beautiful. That mass of flaming red hair reaching halfway down her back was her best feature, but it wasn't her only one. I saw the mobile gleam of sunlight on her thighs and shoulders, the small pert breasts, the exquisite curve of her belly, the mouth a little too large for her face.

"You're beautiful," was all I could say. She scrambled onto the bank and looked me up and down. I started to cringe at her scrutiny, knowing she would end by turning away and putting an end to this impossible moment. Then she smiled, and when she smiled, her mouth suddenly seemed exactly the right size.

"You aren't beautiful, exactly," she said. "But you aren't ugly, either. The word... Oh, I think the word I want is weathered. Like an old tree that's been hit a few times by lightning. You'll stand a long time yet." She stretched her arms over her head, then ran her fingers through her hair. The movements did interesting things for her breasts.

"What about that towel, Major?" she asked, giving a little shiver. The shiver made a drop of water run down her shoulder onto her left breast and hang like a silvery jewel from the nipple. I couldn't take my eyes away, but she didn't seem to care.

Finally, I knew I had to get out of there, or I'd be "standing" in quite another sense of the word. I didn't think Scylla would welcome the normal male reflex from someone who wasn't quite a normal male any more. I went into the cabin and got two towels and an extra pair of sandals. I also put on a pair of shorts, but after a moment's hesitation I didn't bother with a shirt. If she could get used to my scars, maybe there was more hope for my getting used to them.

I expected Scylla to wrap one towel around herself. Instead, she used one to dry her hair and the other to dry her body. After that, she spread both towels on the ground and lay down on them, still with nothing on.

"Scylla," I said as calmly as I could, "aren't you...?"

"Cold? Not now, when I'm dried off. I'd like to just lie here in the sun, if you don't mind." She looked me up and down again. "I won't mind if you think of me as a woman."

Whether she intended that as an invitation to leap on her or not, I'll never know. I do know that the moment the words left her lips, much of the uncertainty and tension, the fear and frustration, left me. Suddenly it didn't matter whether she had any clothes on or not. It didn't even matter whether or not I would ever make love to her. I was more at peace than I'd been since before I was wounded.

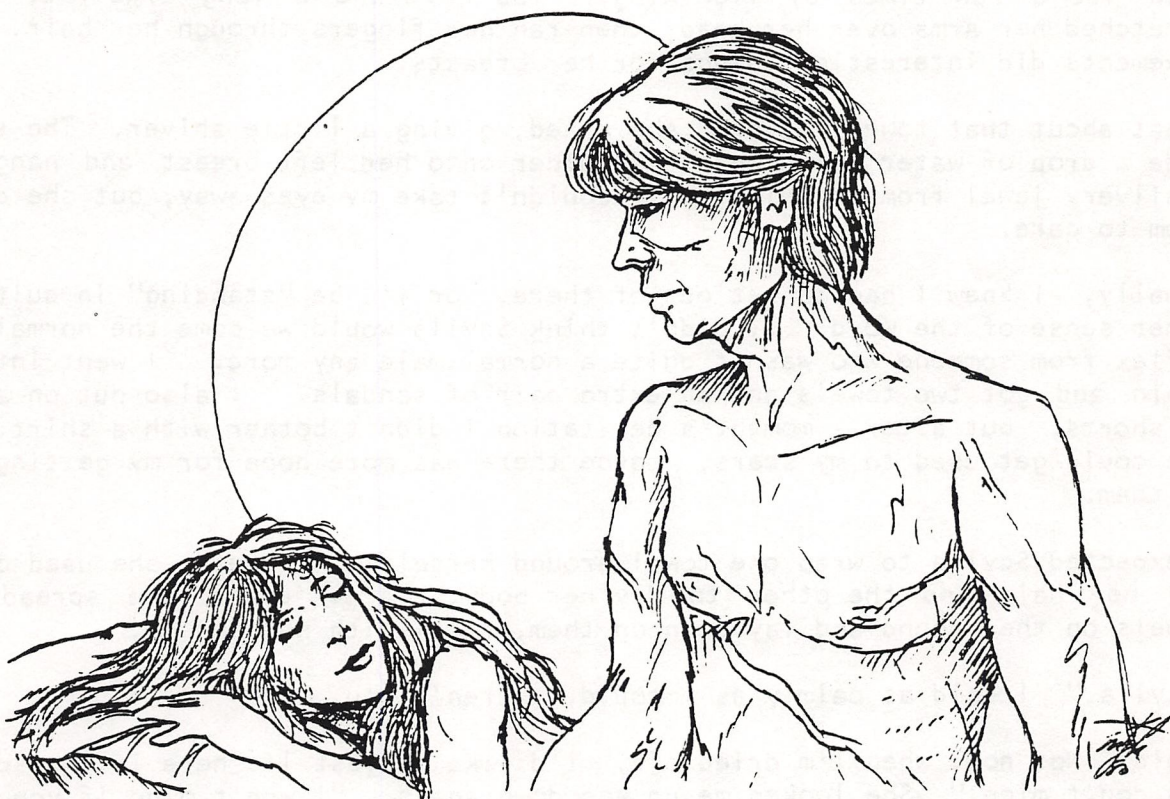
I said the first thing I could think of. "Are you a socialator, Scylla?"

Her laugh was more of a giggle. "That's not even a good guess." Something in her voice told me not to ask what would be a good guess.

We spent the rest of the day as comfortably as if we'd known each other for yahrens. By noon I'd pulled off my shorts, and Scylla went naked all day. We didn't say much, but then, we didn't think we had anything to say which would sound better than the wind in the trees or the splash of the stream. I caught two fish, cleaned them in the kitchen, then put them in the freezer. When I came back out, Scylla was asleep. I sat down beside her, contemplating all that revealed beauty, the red hair now spread out like a crimson fan, the tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip and thighs, the long lashes falling down over

her cheeks.

Now I was really afraid to speak. I knew this had become a place of magic. If I spoke, I'd break the spell Scylla cast.



Toward late afternoon, Scylla awoke and stretched sleep-loosened limbs like a bast. Then she stood up and looked toward the pool. "Lords, I'd better be moving on. Would you loan me some clothes? I don't want to have to swim back to my flyer, and I don't want to push through the trees in this." She slapped one bare thigh.

"No. Bug bites won't improve your skin. I can give you the clothes. But... if you stay for dinner, I can lift you over to your flyer afterward. I'm afraid I don't have too much to feed you, though. It's been a while since I went into town." I was almost stammering, and certainly not picking my words carefully, but I desperately wanted her to stay and not break the spell, at least for a little while.

"If you don't mind eating late, I can fly into town and buy some groceries, then come back out here."

"It'll be dark soon."

"I can handle a flyer at night."

"I..."

"Dion, this must be the first time you've entertained a lady for quite a while. Now, do you want to be ashamed of what you have to feed her?" She patted my shoulder, but the touch didn't excite me as it might have done earlier in the day. She was so obviously eager to get out of here, on almost any reasonable excuse.

I was a fool to think she'd be any different from the rest...

Silently, I brought her trousers and a sweater. She pulled them on, then kissed me lightly on the cheek. "If you've got any ambrosia that needs cooling, put it up now. There's only one good store in Gillian's Crossing, so I won't be long."

She turned away and darted light-footed along the bank of the pond into the forest. When the branches stopped swaying, her spell was broken. The clearing suddenly seemed twice as empty as it ever had before.

"Lords, Lords..." I began. Then the words couldn't force their way out of my throat. I sat down on the boulder, kicked my fishing rod into the pool, and cried. Somewhere through my tears I heard the sound of jets rising, then fading into the distance.

When the sun went down, it got too chilly to sit outdoors naked. I got up and went back into the cabin. I fixed some sausages, and I did put two bottles of ambrosia into the refrigerator. I had some notion of drinking myself to sleep, because I was almost certain I wasn't going to get to sleep any other way.

Then I got up again and put two more bottles in the refrigerator. Somehow, all the effort and pride I'd put into not going my father's way now seemed to have been wasted. Well, after today I wasn't going to waste any more time fighting the general opinion that Major Dion was a burned-out wreck at twenty-five, and...

The sound of jets split the sky outside.

I think I got to the door without my knees knocking together. I know they were doing so as I stood in the doorway, watching Scylla land her flyer in the clearing. Even through the mist in my eyes, I could see she made a superb landing, almost as good as I could have done in my prime.

When she came across the clearing toward me with a large bag in each hand, I once again said the first thing I could think of.

"And you're the lady I thought couldn't fly at night!"

She laughed. "Are you going to ask if I'm a Colonial Warrior?"

"No, I... Oh, Scylla, you're back!"

She dropped the bags as I ran to embrace her. She threw her arms around me, then pressed her lips into the hollow of my throat. Her hair smelled of sun and fresh air.

Without letting go of her, I picked up one of the bags. She picked up the other. With our arms around each other's waists, we walked into the cabin. I turned on the lights, and for the first time tonight she saw me clearly.

"Have you been sitting like that ever since I left?" She shook her head slowly. "Maybe I'd better warm you up." Her voice wasn't quite steady. I turned away, afraid to the last micron that something would go wrong.

Then I felt her fingers running lightly across my stomach, followed by her lips. I looked down. In boots, she was as tall as I. To kiss my stomach, she had to kneel.

"That's your worst scar, the one on your stomach? The one you're most afraid of?" Her lips moved against my skin, and I gasped. "Yes, I can tell it is. I can't heal what's on your skin, but..."

I got both hands under her arms and pulled her to her feet. Then I pulled her against me, hard, my lips on hers, while my hands went up under her sweater. She wasn't wearing anything under it. I felt her nipples grow hard under my thumbs, while her tongue crept out and danced complicated, hot steps with mine.

"Scylla..."

Her own hands were busy, in all the right places. I don't know who led whom to the couch, but I do know neither of us could have lasted as far as the bed-chamber. When we were both naked, we sank down on the couch as if we were one mind and one body. I wasn't aware of myself as a separate person until Scylla cried out under me, and then my own long moan merged with hers.

For the first time in my life, I wanted to go on holding a woman for a long time after my own release, but even inside the cabin it was getting too chilly to sprawl naked on the couch. So we got up, then fixed a truly spectacular dinner from what she'd brought in her bags. We even had wax candles on the table! She must have nearly emptied the local grocery's gourmet shelf. I shuddered to think what the bill would do to my account with them. When I mentioned this, Scylla only shook her head.

"Don't worry about it, Dion."

I sipped some ambrosia and looked at her. She wasn't the water-sprite I'd seen by the pool or the abandoned love goddess I'd held in my arms a centar ago. I wasn't sure I liked the change, but I was determined to get used to it. Nothing would come of my relations with Scylla if I tried to hammer her into the same shape as all the interchangeable girls who'd wanted to bed the hero of the Fleet.

I think I must have gritted my teeth in grim determination, because she frowned. "Is there something worrying you, Dion?"

I sighed. "Thank you, Scylla. Thank you. I feel like a fool, not being able to say any more. But I'd feel like a boor and a lout, not saying at least this much. Thank you." I gripped her hands, pulled them across the table to me, and kissed them.

She smiled. "Don't be too grateful yet, Dion. After all, this is only the first time." She let me pull her toward me around the table, until I was holding her in my arms. I started to stroke her back, and she murmured into my throat. "Be sure to blow out the candles, Dion."

III

We stayed up so late making love that it was broad daylight when we awoke, and much too late for the leisurely breakfast I'd been anticipating when I finally fell asleep with Scylla in my arms. She had to snatch a quick bite, throw her clothes on every which way, dash outside, and take off. I watched, noticing that she took off with the same near-professional skill I'd seen the night before. I could watch more closely, because now I wasn't nearly so worried about the future, and even the past was beginning to look a bit less depressing. I knew it was going to hurt if this was our one and only night together, but it would be a pain I could live with. It would be the first time in yahrens I could say that.

I didn't have to worry. Scylla called me two days later, asking if I could put her up and put up with her for the night. I agreed. She came out, it was as good as the first night even without the surprise, and after that she came out two or three times a section all summer.

It was always Scylla who called me, then flew out to my cabin. She left me a screen code where I could leave messages in case I wasn't going to be at home, but that only reached a recorder, never her. It occurred to me at first that she might be ashamed to be seen in public with me. It's a measure of what she was doing for me that I didn't think that long. I did begin to think there was too much mystery about her for someone I'd let come so close to me.

"Why are you always bringing the food?" I asked her once. "I'm not that poor. Or are you fattening me up for the slaughter?"

She wrinkled her nose to imply what she thought of that joke. "I'm not bringing more than I eat, really." That was true enough; for a woman who managed to stay slim and elegant, she had an astounding appetite. "Besides, I'm pretty sure I know how much your cabin and flyer cost you. There's not that much left over for groceries, right?"

"No. I'd have more if I didn't spend so much on my history books, but..."

"Don't give them up. Don't ever give them up," she said. I'd never heard her speak so sharply.

"All right, Scylla."

I didn't raise the question of her money again. But I noticed that her flyer must have cost as much as everything I'd ever owned put together. It had full all-weather equipment, reclining couches with leather upholstery, exotic wood panelling, even a small bar. I couldn't help noticing this, after she started flying me to the coast. We'd spend the day in the sun and sea wind, swimming naked on deserted beaches and then making love in the shelter of the wind-twisted trees on the bluffs.

I also couldn't help noticing again that she flew like an expert. If she had never been a fighter pilot, she was certainly wasting at least one of her talents.

I remember particularly well one evening when we met a thunderstorm on the way home. The clouds rose to fifteen thousand metres or more, and I knew the wind and lightning inside would be vicious. In spite of this, Scylla headed right for the storm front, until out of the corner of her eye she saw me fidgeting.

"Do you think the storm's too much for this flyer?"

"If you were on a military mission and time was short, it might be worth the risk. But if you were on a military mission, you'd have a high-altitude flyer you could take over the storm. I'd say find a clearing and go to ground until the storm's over."

"Would you like to take the controls?"

She said that so casually I didn't even suspect she might have some special reason for asking until I'd already answered it as a common-sense question. "No. I can still handle a flyer in good weather, but I haven't flown in anything like this since I left the Fleet."

"All right, then, we'll go down."

It took us a while to find a safe landing place, and by the time we were down the rain was going taka-taka-taka on the canopy. I had plenty of time to watch Scylla's long fingers moving deftly over the controls, and realise she probably could have taken us through the storm. I also had time to understand she'd been testing me, to see how comfortable I was about not being a super-pilot any more. I hoped I passed her test.

Then we were down, on ground already turning into mud under the beating of the rain. She looked at me, brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes, then lowered the backs of the couches. We unstrapped, got rid of our clothes, and made love there in the grounded flyer, with the thunder crashing overhead, the lightning flaring like Cylon bolts, and the rain drumming so hard on the canopy and fuselage that for once I couldn't hear Scylla's happy noises.

When the storm passed and we took to the air again, we flew home with Scylla's hand in mine. That day in the storm, she closed a door on a lot of the darkness in my past. I could no longer doubt it. I loved Scylla, and I wanted to be sealed to her even if she was full of mysteries, even if the price for the sealing was leaving those mysteries intact. I suspected she was old-family and wealthy, but that didn't bother me. Even if she was a princess, she was the sort who'd treat her consort honourably and faithfully. One step behind Scylla would still be a long way ahead of anywhere else I'd ever been or was likely to be.

IV

When autumn came, Scylla started visiting only once a section. Then for a whole sector she didn't come at all, although she called me every few days. I was so caught up in my history reading and so willing to trust her that I

didn't worry too much. I did find my bed a lot colder without her in it, though.

At the end of the sector, I got a recorded message asking me to come to her apartment the next evening. For the first time, I knew her address -- the Street of the Dragons in Northport, the big city for this end of the continent. I knew the Street of the Dragons was the wealthiest part of Northport, thought my guess about Scylla's wealth was confirmed, and didn't care any more than I had before. If she insisted her wealth was a barrier to our getting sealed, I would listen politely -- but I would be as deaf as a deactivated Cylon.

The next evening, I flew to Northport, walked downhill from the landing ground to the Street of the Dragons, and then along it to Scylla's apartment house. I didn't go straight in. The doorman recognised me and asked me to sign an autograph for his son. The boy was nine, and wanted to fly with the Colonial Warriors, or at least to serve in space on a battlestar.

"I suppose he had pictures of me all over his wall?" I asked as I signed.

"He still does," said the doorman. Either he hadn't heard the cynicism in my voice or was tactfully ignoring it. "He says he wishes there were some new ones."

I was touched at finding more loyalty in a nine-year-old boy than in some Fleet Commanders. "I'm not in uniform, and frankly, I'm no recruiting poster any more. But if you've got a camera, I can pose for a couple of pictures."

"Would you, Major? My boy'd be delighted!"

"Go get your camera."

So I stood there in the hallway, with the dead leaves skittering past the door outside, while the doorman took half a dozen pictures of me. I don't know how well they turned out, because my face got twisted up with the effort not to cry for sheer happiness.

I've wondered ever since if Scylla put the doorman up to the whole thing; it's one of the few questions about our love I'd still like to have answered. I do know I had no doubts at the time, and it certainly helped me.

When I finally stepped into Scylla's apartment, I had a micron's feeling I must have come to the wrong place. This is really a museum, I thought. I saw a pair of crystal vases from Gemini, with erotic designs on their golden lids; I saw a Picon chest of polished cinderwood, with the red tone deep in the blackness you find only in the finest cinderwood; I saw a tapestry from Caprica which must have gone back to before the Cylon wars. I saw something priceless from each of the Twelve Worlds, and I mentally raised my estimate of Scylla's rank.

Not a princess -- a queen. Perhaps that's why she spent so much time showing me the woman underneath...

A soft sound behind me. I turned, unfastening my coat. "I'm sorry to be



late, Scylla, but..."

The words stopped coming. Scylla wore a black gown, suspended from a single thin strand of jewels around her neck. It covered her completely in front, but in back it ended at the base of her spine. Her hair was caught up in a silver ring, then flowed freely down her back. She wore the most subtle of cosmetics, and no perfume except her own health and life.

I'd never seen her so beautiful or so desirable, and I said so: She swallowed and raised a hand to beckon me. "Let's have dinner."

The gourmet stores of Northport did better for us that night than ever before, but I was careful not to eat or drink too much. I didn't want to get sleepy. Ten times over, I didn't want Scylla to think my proposal the result of too much ambrosia. I was so careful that as we started on dessert, she frowned.

"Dion, are you feeling well? You don't seem to have much appetite."

I put my glass down on a table which suddenly seemed to have receded light-years into the distance, moving as carefully as I'd ever done at the controls of a fighter. "Scylla, let's get sealed. Tomorrow, if we can."

She dropped her own glass, and the ambrosia spattered across the white tablecloth. I rose to go to her. Her hands fluttered desperately, as her usual calm completely deserted her. "I'm sorry, Dion. I'm sorry. I was hoping you hadn't got so far. I did. That's why I didn't see you for a whole sector. I

had to find out if there was any hope for us. I didn't want to talk about it if there wasn't. But..." She started crying helplessly.

I held her like a hurt child until she stopped crying, able to ignore the fact that she was as warm in my arms as ever and that my hands were on the bare skin of her back. Then she kissed me, looked in the mirror over the fireplace, and winced.

"Dion, I'd better go and wash. My cosmetics..."

I couldn't see any signs of damage, but I knew she wanted some time to herself. "Go ahead."

I was sipping ambrosia, being very careful with the size of the sips, when she came back. She was wearing a battered purple dressing gown that clashed spectacularly with her hair. Her eyes were red but dry, and she generally looked much more like the Scylla I knew and loved. I knew this wouldn't make the bad news coming any better, but I felt more able to face it.

"Dion, I would be the happiest woman in the Twelve Colonies if we could be sealed. But we can't. I'm sealed to another man. I've asked him to release me, but he's refused. Even more, he's threatened my family if I don't return to him."

"Your family? But I thought..."

"Don't think, Dion, just listen. The faster I can tell this, the...easier..."

She got through the ugly story as quickly as possible. She was from Caprica, the daughter of a Fleet officer retired for disability. Her father was dead, and her mother, who was in failing health herself, had nothing but her widow's pension to live on. Somehow, she'd managed to raise and educate both Scylla and her younger brother. By the time she was twenty, Scylla knew she was a prize. She set out to have herself won by a man rich enough to relieve her mother and brother of all future worries.

The man who won her was from Picon, and as heir to one of the planet's largest fortunes he was unquestionably rich enough. He was also brutal, drunken, and generally unpleasant in any number of large and small ways. His family's rank and wealth bought him immunity from the law, but not from his wife's hatred. After it became obvious they weren't going to have any children, he became so impossible to live with that she ran away. To avoid a scandal, his family kept him from going after her at once, or even from cutting off an annual allowance that was more than ten yahrens of her mother's pension. For a while, at least, she would have all the freedom she could hope for.

"I had to be able to do as I pleased for a yahren or so. Otherwise I knew I'd go mad. So I came to Taura, where I didn't know anyone and nobody knew me."

I found I'd sipped my glass empty, and refilled it. "Scylla, you were looking for a thrill that first day, weren't you? Just..." I caught myself short of saying, "Just like all the other girls who played with me," but I think she knew anyway. Scylla was either a telepath or much too close to it for the comfort of any man with thoughts to hide.

"Yes," she said. "But will you believe me when I say I stopped looking after about five centons? I would have been lower than a Cylon if I hadn't..."

"I believe you, Scylla."

She put her hand on mine. "Thank you, Dion."

She hadn't expected to fall in love with me even when she stopped looking for thrills. But it happened, and there we were, in a situation neither of us had foreseen. Whether the situation produced happiness or misery now depended entirely on Scylla's husband.

"I laid everything before him a section ago," she said. "Everything except your name. I didn't want you caught in..."

"Scylla, I'd fight the Lords of Kobol themselves for you."

"And I'd let you, if it would do any good. But it won't. There are enough people in the Fleet who'd like it forgotten how badly they treated you after you were hurt. If your reputation could be blackened enough, it would be. My husband can buy a dozen filthy lies about you out of his small-cash fund. Then he'd get all the money back ten times over in defence contracts."

That wasn't the Fleet I'd dreamed of as a boy -- but it was the Fleet as I knew it. "Go on."

Her husband not only refused to release her, he threatened to strike at her family if she didn't come back. Her mother would be a charity case without her pension and what her daughter sent her. Both would certainly be cut off if Scylla's husband brought enough pressure to bear in the right places. Her brother was now a technician aboard the battlestar PACIFICA, and his career could be destroyed overnight. Scylla wasn't entirely sure her husband would be above arranging her brother's "accidental" death. He certainly had enough money, if he ever got the idea.

She couldn't even try to leave her husband, not without virtually signing the death warrants of her mother and brother. And, sooner or later, I'd also get dragged into the muck.

"Your husband might not even stop short of murdering you," I pointed out.

"Possibly." I could tell this had occurred to her, but she hadn't thought it worth mentioning. I've seen less courage and selflessness in men who fought Cylons barehanded. There are no medals for her kind of courage, either.

I saw that the ambrosia bottle was empty, and rose to get another. Scylla met me halfway around the table, pressing her fingers into my shoulders. "Lords, you're all knotted up there. Take off your jacket, lie down on the couch, and let me try doing something about those knots."

I didn't want a massage; I wanted another drink and some time to swallow the lump in my throat. But I wanted an argument with Scylla even less, so I let her lead me to the couch. She quickly stripped me to the waist, then practically shoved me down on my face and straddled me.

Scylla was much stronger than you'd expect of such a slim woman, and she was putting her best into the massage. After a while, I could start feeling the knots and kinks fading out of my muscles. The lump in my throat was still there, but even it was shrinking.

Then there was a short pause in the massage, and a soft voice murmured, "Don't move, Dion." I felt her weight on me again, but this time I also felt hair tickling my shoulder blades, then brushing a path down the length of my spine. Her weight shifted, and now I felt two little points of warmth moving over my flesh. I'd felt them often enough to recognise Scylla's bare nipples.

All my reflexes and coordination hadn't left me. I rolled over on my back before Scylla could jump clear, and without throwing her off. The purple dressing gown lay on the floor, and her hair fell down over her eyes. I gripped both her wrists and laughed.

"All right, Scylla. If we can't make a match, let's make some memories."

I sat up and pulled her to me, kissing her breasts until she moaned, without stopping her from undoing my pants and going to work until I couldn't keep quiet, either. After that, we left our clothes on the couch and went to the bedchamber. I carried her, which I shouldn't have been able to do, but there were no limits for either of us that night.

We went through every possible mood and movement a man and a woman can find in making love. I remember Scylla laughing as she ran her mouth over every part of my body. I remember biting my lip until it bled as she rode me and I fought to hold back. I remember three bottles of ambrosia, and a lot of other things which are nobody else's business.

I also remember very clearly that it came to an end only when Scylla fell asleep in my arms. I thought of a thousand things to say, but couldn't see that it was worth waking her up for any of them. As for waiting until dawn to say them, I knew that if I didn't leave before dawn, I probably wouldn't leave at all. Then all Scylla had done to heal me would be turned against both of us, to destroy us. Eventually, I kissed each nipple, then her lips, pulled the blankets over her, put on my clothes, and left. I was surprised to learn it was only a little after midnight.

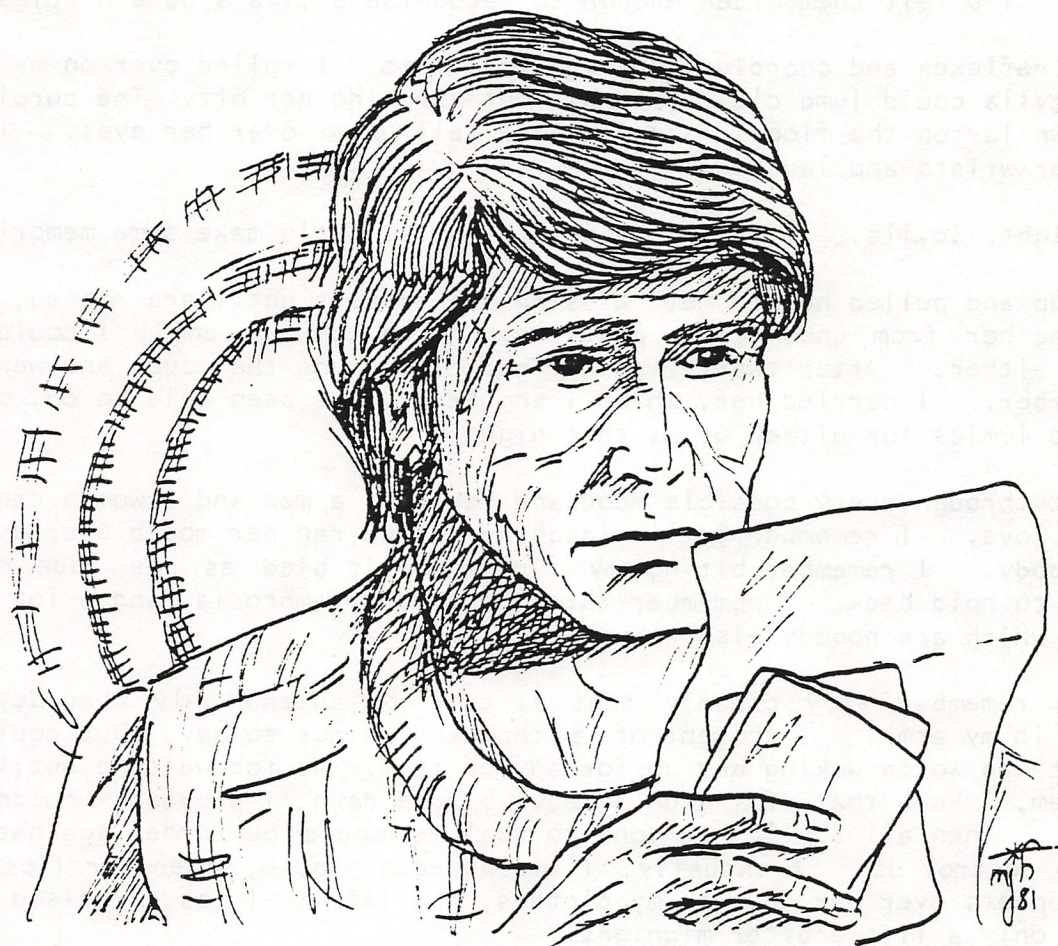
Parts of the rest of that night I wouldn't wish on a Cylon. I said things about my father, the Fleet, old families, Scylla, and myself that I've tried my best to forget. I pounded my fists on the ground until they bled. If Scylla's husband had appeared before me, I think I would have flayed him alive -- then held a party on the day of my execution.

He didn't appear, and neither did Scylla. What appeared and stayed with me was a single thought. *Scylla fought this battle for you. Don't throw away her victory. Don't let her work go to waste.* That thought cut away at me all night like a mining laser in hard rock, and toward morning it broke through. Scylla had closed a door on the darkness in my past. For a few centars it had been ajar -- but now it was closed again.

I faced the dawn with an empty stomach, a clear head, and the knowledge that this time the door would stay closed.

I never saw Scylla again, but I do have a little of her still with me besides the memories.

Two sections after the night of our farewell, I went into Gillian's Crossing to pick up a last load of food and mail, and start arrangements for selling the cabin. I found a package waiting for me. It held a plain gold sealing ring, with the initials *D* and *S* engraved on it. There were also half a dozen pictures of Scylla, one a holo of her in her favourite bathing suit -- nothing at all -- and a short letter.



Dear Dion,

I'm sending you this ring for what might have been, and the pictures for what was. I can also send you some good news. I have agreed to return to my husband, and take my place at his side in Picon society. He will let me spend a yahren on Caprica with my mother before I return. Do not hope I can do anything to make it possible for us to come together again, for that cannot be. But do not fear I will ever forget you, either.

The Lords, and my love, be with you always,

Scylla

Scylla did go back to her husband. Three yahrens later, she died with him in the famous Asteroid Raid, when the Cylons wiped out several of the Picon system's luxury resorts -- one of the few good day's work the Cylons ever did, I say. I did not mourn her then. I mourned the real Scylla, the one I knew and loved and would have taken for all my life, that night by the pool. What died in the Asteroid Raid was only a puppet, going through motions dictated by a puppet-master she hated. I can't say if she was glad to die, but I can't imagine that any reasonable form of release from what her life must have become by then was completely unwelcome.

I sold the cabin before winter came to the Gryphons, and went on selling things until I had nothing left except a few personal things and my books. Everything I made on the sales, and everything left of my bonuses, I made over to my father.

I also made over three-quarters of my pension to him. That took more time, and the bending of a few rules, but I found there were now some people in the Fleet willing to help me. Some of them may have actually been ashamed of the way I was treated. Others may have helped because they knew it would make them look good -- helping Major Dion save his aged father. I didn't know who did what for which reason, and I didn't really care. I knew my future was no longer with the Fleet.

My father and I didn't have any great sentimental reconciliation, incidentally. We'd each given the other wounds which wouldn't heal easily. But we ended up respecting each other's choices, and not having to worry about money did a lot for my father. He stopped drinking, started a flyer repair business of his own, and even remarried. He eventually died the same yahren I left aboard the OSIRIS; he was a respected and respectable citizen of Scorpio instead of just another drunken charity case.

So I wasn't the only man better off for Scylla's victory. A great socialator was lost when that woman decided she needed a rich husband!

As for me, well, the rest is a matter of public record. I entered the Academy of History as a Scholar Candidate, spent five yahrens there, and graduated with one of the ten highest marks ever recorded. It didn't hurt that I lived like a sworn ascetic during those yahrens. It was probably just as well that few people knew who I was, because otherwise the idea of Major Dion living without women, liquor, and good times for five yahrens would have sent everyone into hysterics.

After I graduated, they offered me a post on the faculty of the Academy. I accepted it, and for twenty yahrens the Academy was my life. I wanted and needed no other. Then I heard of the OSIRIS expedition, and found I wanted to see space again before the yahrens and bad health kept me planet-bound for good. You don't take the kind of punishment I did without losing some of your life span. I also knew the OSIRIS was going to be the best chance I'd have during the yahrens I had left. Regular battlestars don't have much room for middle-aged scholars. I put in for the post of Second Archivist aboard the OSIRIS, and somewhat to my surprise, I got it.

My career aboard the OSIRIS has been just as public as my career at the Academy of History. The only part I need to talk about here is how I came to the

point of recording this autobiography. I started walking that particular road about a yahren after the OSIRIS left on her voyage. Quite unexpectedly, I wound up entertaining a fellow officer -- female, who shall remain nameless -- in my cabin. So unexpectedly, in fact, that I hadn't cleared away some things I usually didn't leave out for visitors to see. One of those things was a picture of Scylla. You can easily guess which one.

I got up to put it away, which drew the lady's attention to it. She let out a squawk of surprise. "Why, you...! How did you ever get the Ice Princess to pose for you?"

I looked at her as if she'd just changed into a Cylon. "The who?"

"The Ice Princess. You know, Captain Diana, of Purple Squadron."

I looked from the lady to the picture and back to the lady, then shook my head. "That's not Captain Diana."

"Nonsense! Or are you going to say it's her twin sister? Diana doesn't have a twin sister -- I know that much about her. Now tell me, how did you get her to pose like that? There are a few..."

"That is not Diana!" I said, in a voice like a cutter going through steel. Then I realised I was close to spoiling a pleasant occasion, and possibly revealing a few too many secrets. "It's a lady I used to know on Caprica. There are lots of redheads on Caprica."

"Yes, but... That has to be Diana."

I shook my head wearily. "By all the Lords of Kobol, I swear it isn't. I've only seen the Captain ten times since we left base. She had her clothes on every time."

I hoped she wouldn't ask why I didn't have more to do with the pilots, who were everybody else's favourite drinking and sleeping partners. It was simple enough. I still didn't care to hear talk that brought back too much of the old days.

I cared even less to have someone recognise me and make me instantly famous -- or notorious. The only pilot old enough to remember when Major Dion was a household word was Colonel Arsenaux, now the Executive Officer, and I trusted his discretion. But there would always be some young...individual...who knew his history but not his manners, to blurt it out. Somebody like Arion, for example, even though he wasn't aboard then. So I stayed away from the pilots, and nobody was the worse for it.

The lady was either convinced or tactful. She shut up, and we passed on to much more pleasant ways of using the night. But she'd started some questions going round and round in my mind like asteroids, and I wondered if I shouldn't look for some answers.

The next day, I looked at Captain Diana with new eyes. By the Lords, she did look enough like Scylla to frighten me for a few centons. I decided I was going to answer those questions.

The search for the answers has taken me all the time since that day. I now know it could have gone much faster if I'd been willing to speak to Commander Christopher or his wife, Major Meret, First Archivist and my immediate superior. I didn't, because I didn't want to talk to anyone who might carry tales to the wrong ears. I kept my silence even after we came back to discover the Colonies destroyed and nothing for us to do but set off on the trail of the GALACTICA. I followed my own private trail, until it brought me to the point where I knew I had to speak to the Commander.

He told me certain things which made me know I was right. He also told me plainly that he did not think the secret was either his or mine to keep.

"You'd better examine your conscience, Major, about how long you've kept silent, and how much longer you want to do so. I won't ask you to do more, however. I swore on my honour to hold my peace on this, and I will keep that oath."

Then he gave me permission to use File 7. So now I can break my silence without facing many questions to which I have no answers. I can make sure that what I now know to be the truth will live on after me.

Captain Diana is Scylla's daughter, and mine.

She looks like Scylla. She even has some of the same mannerisms. She is an adopted child, who never knew her real parents. She was born on Caprica, at a date which makes it certain she was conceived during the summer Scylla and I spent together.

"There are lots of redheads on Caprica," you say, throwing my own words back at me. True. But redheads who look so much like my Scylla that people mistake her for them, and who are exactly the right age to come from our summer of love? They don't grow on bushes.

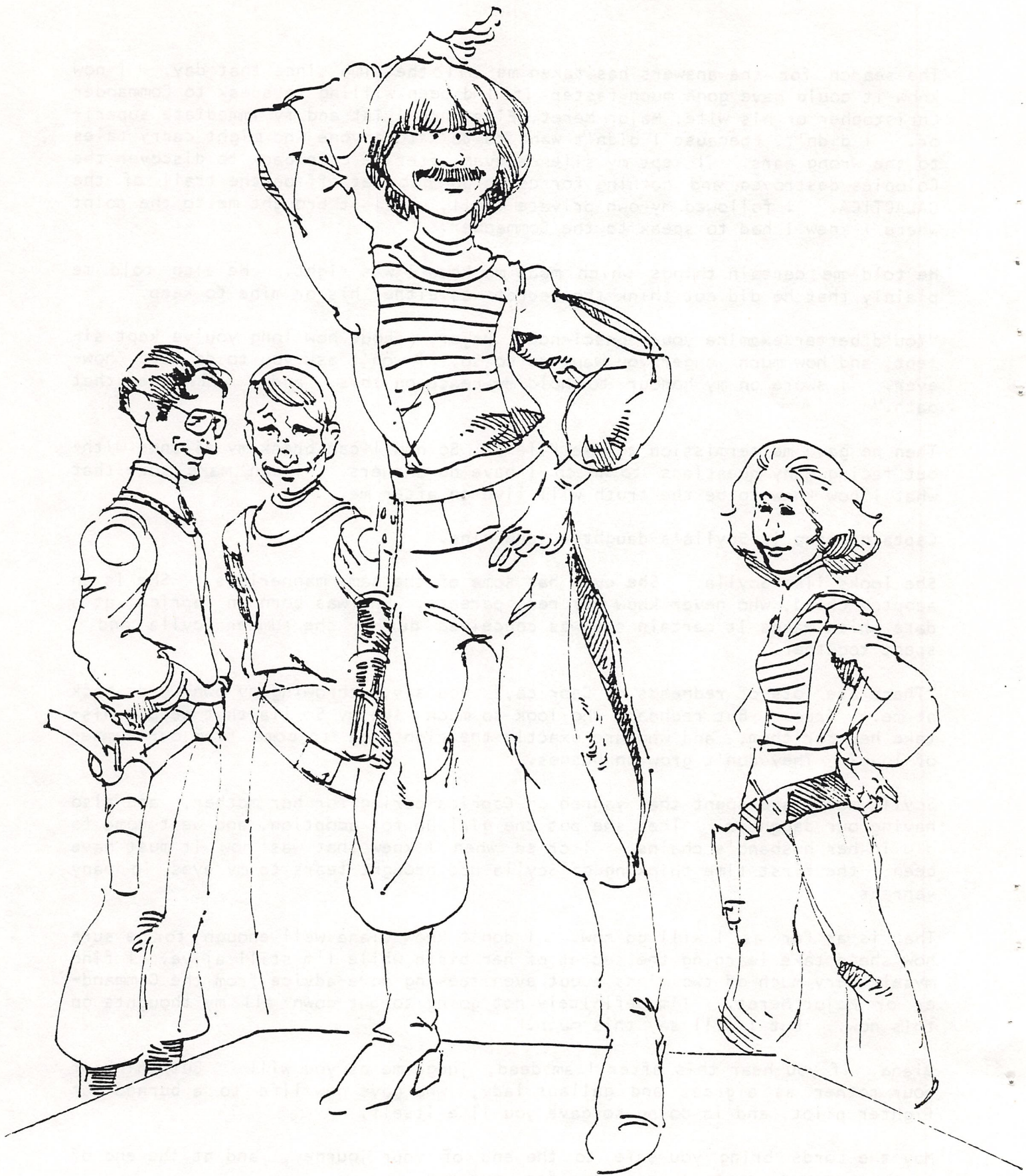
Scylla must have spent that yahren on Caprica caring for her mother, and also having our daughter. Then she put the girl up for adoption, and went home to die in her husband's chains. I cried when I knew that was how it must have been, the first time thinking of Scylla had brought tears to my eyes in many yahrens.

That is as far as I will go now. I don't know Diana well enough to be sure how she'd take learning the secret of her birth while I'm still alive. I find myself very much of two minds about even seeking more advice from the Commander or Major Meret. I'm definitely not going to put down all my thoughts on this now. But I will say this much.

Diana, if you hear this after I am dead, judge me as you will. But think of your mother as a great and gallant lady, who gave new life to a burned-out fighter pilot, and in doing so gave you life itself.

May the Lords bring you safe to the end of your journey, and at the end of that journey give you such a love for your own.

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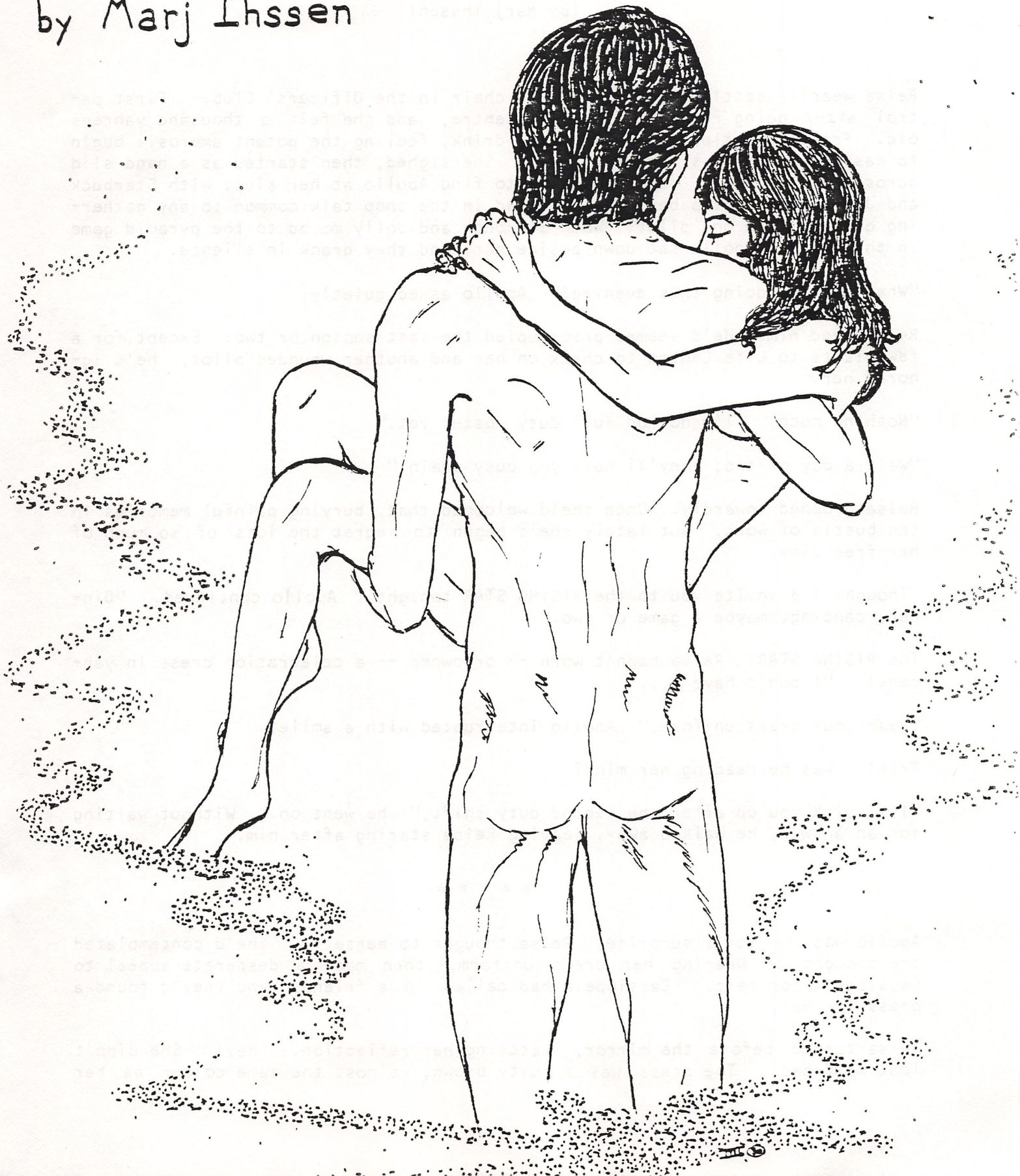


IN MY CONSIDERED OPINION, ENGINEER,
IF HE GOES OUT IN THAT COSTUME, HE'S
GONNA NEED THAT BLASTER...

WITS-80

GIFT OF THE GODS

by Marj Ihssen



"Gift of the Gods"

(By Marj Ihssen)

Reisa wearily settled herself into a chair in the Officers' Club. First patrol after being released from Life Centre, and she felt a thousand yahrens old. Frak! She sipped at her second drink, feeling the potent ambrosia begin to ease the stiffness from her body. She sighed, then started as a hand slid across her shoulder. She looked up to find Apollo at her side, with Starbuck and Jolly just a step beyond, immersed in the shop talk common to any gathering of more than one pilot. When Starbuck and Jolly moved to the pyramid game in the corner, Apollo sat down beside her, and they drank in silence.

"What are you doing this evening?" Apollo asked quietly.

Reisa eyed him. He'd seemed preoccupied the last section or two. Except for a few visits to Life Centre to check on her and another wounded pilot, he'd ignored her.

"Nothing much. I'm not on full duty roster yet."

"Wait a day or two; they'll have you busy again."

Reisa groaned inwardly. Once she'd welcomed that, burying painful memories in the bustle of work, but lately she'd begun to regret the loss of so much of her free time.

"Thought I'd invite you to the RISING STAR tonight," Apollo continued. "Dinner, dancing, maybe a game or two."

The RISING STAR? Reisa hadn't worn -- or owned -- a celebration dress in yahrens! "I don't have a..."

"Wear your dress uniform," Apollo interrupted with a smile.

Frak! Was he reading her mind?

"I'll pick you up after the second duty shift," he went on. Without waiting for an answer, he walked away, leaving Reisa staring after him.

* * * * *

Apollo was in for a surprise, Reisa thought to herself. She'd contemplated the thought of wearing her dress uniform, then made a desperate appeal to Cassiopeia for help. Cassiopeia had called in a friend, and they'd found a dress for her.

Reisa turned before the mirror, watching her reflection. Hey! She didn't look half bad. The dress was a rusty brown, almost the same colour as her

dress cape, with tan panels slashing across the front. There was so little of it on top, it made her feel half naked. Reisa grinned as she swirled the skirt around her legs. It was higher than her knees in front, falling in soft folds below the tops of her brown fringed boots in back. It had been yahrens -- long yahrens -- since she'd dressed like this, and she'd almost forgotten how good it felt.

There was a knock, and she opened the door to Apollo. All the previous centars' fuss was made worthwhile by the appreciative look in his eyes and the slow smile that spread across his face. The sight of him standing there in his dress browns did interesting things to her pulse rate, too. She gathered up the short cape that completed her outfit, and Apollo took it from her, laying it around her shoulders and fastening it with gentle fingers.

"That's a very unusual dress uniform, Lieutenant."

She grinned at him. She'd no intention of telling him the fuss she'd gone to.

"Shall we go?" He held out his hand, and she placed hers in it. As they went, she watched him covertly, and realised he was proud of her, treating her as if she was royalty. It was an unusual -- and very pleasant -- experience, a touch of a way of life that no longer existed.

Dinner was standard fare, but so disguised that it could have come from one of the finest cateries in the Colonies. And dancing... Reisa hadn't danced in yahrens, didn't know any of the new styles, but under Apollo's guidance she quickly picked them up, although once, in the tassel dance, she missed a cue and nearly strangled them both in the ribbons. After they untangled and stopped laughing, she cried quits, and they returned to their table.

Apollo poured her a glass of ambrosia. She sipped, coughed, and sipped again -- far more cautiously. Whew! A hundred-yahren vintage, if she was any judge, and very expensive, usually reserved for the Councillors and their like. She cast an inquiring glance at Apollo. What was he up to? But she decided not to question. She'd not had an evening like this in yahrens, and she intended to enjoy every moment of it.

Reisa didn't play in the chancery, content to stand at Apollo's side and watch, but he left after a few hands and gathered up her cape from the table. This time, when his hands fastened the catch at her throat, they lingered, gently caressing. Her breath caught, and her pulse gave a leap. He grinned, then, with an arm around her waist, escorted her from the chancery.

Reisa wasn't sure what to expect. This Apollo was far different from the Captain and Flight Commander she knew, and that strange look in his eyes... A tinge of uneasiness ran through her, a feeling that increased when he led her to a private room on one of the upper levels of the luxury liner. Not that she feared his attentions. They'd been lovers other times since that memorable occasion when someone spiked the party punch. But that was merely a friendly sharing of physical needs and desires. This...

Gentle hands undid the catch of her cape and slid it to the floor. Apollo's fingers explored her neck and wound in among her hair, drawing her to him. Their lips met, but in something far different from a kiss of passion.

Breathless, Reisa drew back, heart pounding. She shook her hair free and looked up into his eyes, seeing the strange look there, and suddenly understanding.

"Reisa," Apollo whispered, "I love..."

"Don't...don't say it!" With a cry, she buried her face against his chest.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I didn't mean... I was afraid..." Her voice was strained. Apollo's hand smoothed her hair, running lightly down her bare back. "I didn't want..."

Apollo could feel her shaking. Afraid? Afraid of what? He'd seen the woman shivering in his arms face down an armed group of mutineers without a quiver. Afraid of him? Strong fingers tipped her face up to meet his look. Tears were pooled in her eyes. He kissed her, letting a touch of passion emerge, and felt her body respond to him. That wasn't what she feared.

"Tell me." Apollo's voice was gentle, but adamant, and Reisa knew she couldn't leave it like that. She looked up, seeing the love still glowing in his eyes.

"I didn't want to be hurt again, or to hurt you, Apollo."

"How?"

"Like I was when I lost my husband and my son, and you, Serina." His eyes darkened a moment in memory. "It hurt so much, I wanted to die. I even tried to kill myself once, but Starbuck stopped me." Apollo was startled; that was something Starbuck hadn't told him. "I didn't want to ever be that vulnerable again. And then... Then I fell in love with a picky, obnoxious, stuck-up, driving perfectionist. You were always after me, always yelling, and I... I loved you. It scared me. I never meant you to know."

Apollo held her tightly, understanding what she was trying to say. When she'd been so badly hurt this last time, he'd found, to his dismay, that their friendship had grown into something greater, something that, at first, he'd been unwilling to accept. But love wasn't a thing you could turn on or off at will. Despite his love for Diana, and his knowledge that she was still alive, he also loved the woman now in his arms. A measure of the strength of the fleeting thing called love, that two Warriors, who daily faced death, could be so torn by its fragile touch.

Reisa leaned against him until her shivering stopped, soothed away by the gentle touch of his hands. Then she stepped back and looked long into his eyes. With a sigh, she wound her arms around his neck. She'd no longer fight it. If the gods so gifted them, she'd not deny their gift, but would accept and enjoy, and live with whatever happiness -- or pain -- the future brought. She answered Apollo's gentle kiss with all the love she'd pent up so long, and his arms tightened around her until she couldn't breathe. She didn't care.

Her senses were swimming when the kiss ended. He guided her to the bed, where she sat, catching her breath, while he removed his cape and holster. But

when his hands moved to his belt, she stopped him. She undid the belt herself and set it aside. Her fingers moved to his shoulder and began separating the fastening of his top, easing it over his shoulders. It fell to the floor, and her hands ran slowly over the smoothly muscled chest so exposed, caressing, almost worshipping.

Apollo gathered her to him, kissing the corners of her lips lightly, nuzzling her hair, blowing gently in her ear. He felt her quiver against him, her fingers moving across his shoulders and back. He bent his head, his nibbling kisses tracing a path down her neck and throat. He dallied with the softness there while his fingers slid first one shoulder, then the other, free of the dress.

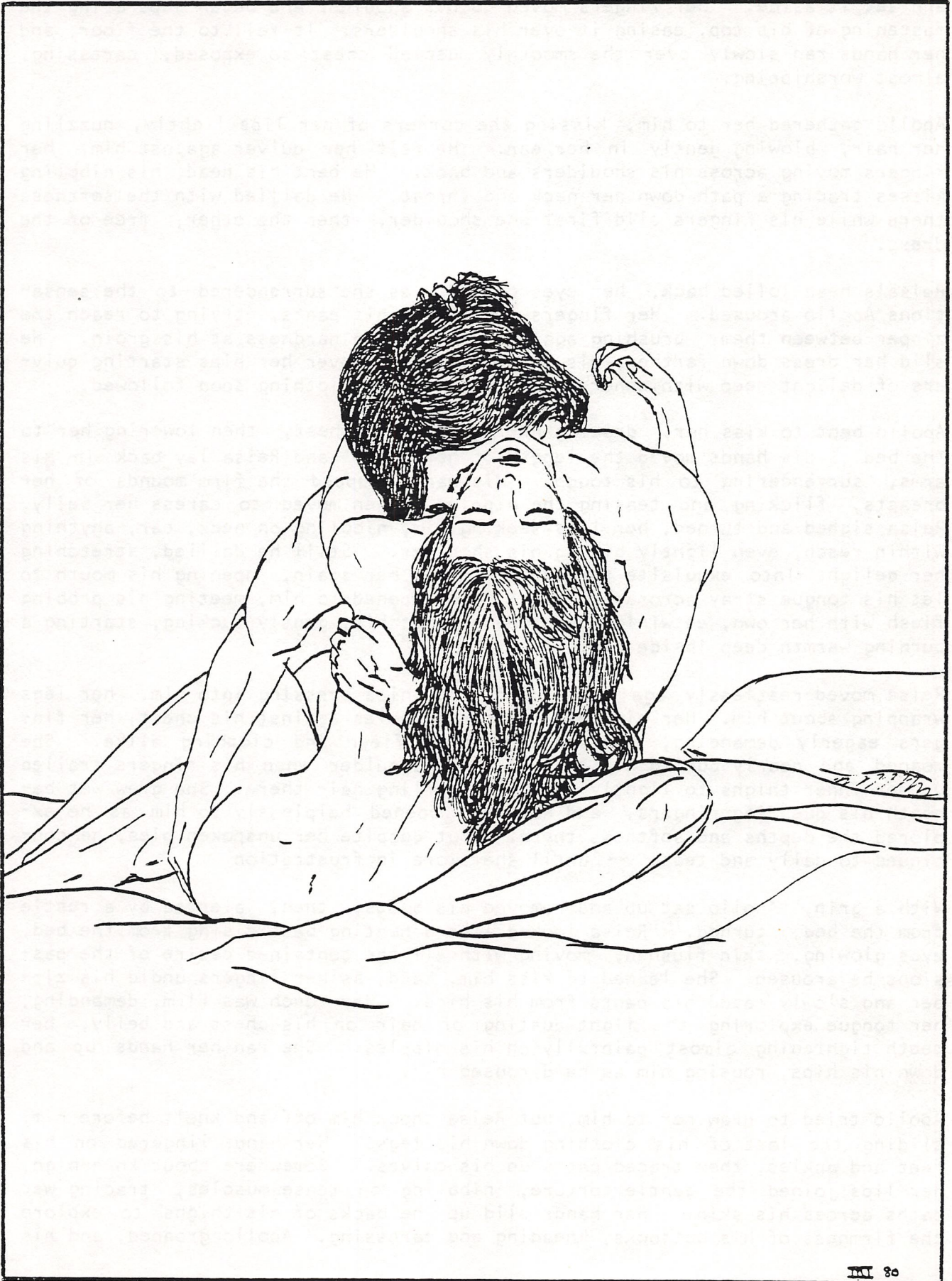
Reisa's head lolled back, her eyes closed, as she surrendered to the sensations Apollo aroused. Her fingers tugged at his pants, trying to reach the zipper between them, brushing against the growing hardness at his groin. He slid her dress down farther, his slow, firm touch over her hips starting quivers of delight deep within her. The rest of her clothing soon followed.

Apollo bent to kiss her, drawing her against his chest, then lowering her to the bed. His hands moved the length of her body, and Reisa lay back in his arms, surrendering to his touch. His hands cupped the firm mounds of her breasts, flicking and teasing the nipples, then moved to caress her belly. Reisa sighed and turned, her lips seeking him, nibbling on neck, ear, anything within reach, even lightly biting his shoulder. Still he dallied, stretching her delight into exquisite torture, kissing her again, opening his mouth to let his tongue stray across her lips. She opened to him, meeting his probing flesh with her own, entwining her tongue about his, gently sucking, starting a burning warmth deep inside him.

Reisa moved restlessly against Apollo, her hips pressing into him, her legs wrapping about him. Her nipples were hard pebbles against his chest, her fingers eagerly demanding, running over bare flesh and clothing alike. She moaned and nearly buried her teeth in his shoulder when his fingers trailed up her inner thighs to lightly touch the curling hair there. She grew wet beneath his questing fingers, and her legs opened helplessly to him as he explored the depths and softness there. But despite her unspoken plea, he continued to dally and tease -- until she swore in frustration.

With a grin, Apollo sat up and removed his boots, then, alerted by a rustle from the bed, turned. Reisa looked like a hunting beast rising from the bed, eyes glowing, skin flushed, moving with all the contained desire of the passions he aroused. She leaned to kiss him, hard, as her fingers undid his zipper and slowly eased his pants from his hips. Her touch was firm, demanding, her tongue exploring the light dusting of hair on his chest and belly, her teeth tightening almost painfully on his nipples. She ran her hands up and down his hips, rousing him as he'd roused her.

Apollo tried to draw her to him, but Reisa shook him off and knelt before him, sliding the last of his clothing down his legs. Her hands lingered on his feet and ankles, then traced paths up his calves. Somewhere about knee-high, her lips joined the gentle torture, nibbling on tense muscles, tracing wet paths across his skin. Her hands slid up the backs of his thighs to explore the firmness of his buttocks, kneading and caressing. Apollo groaned, and his



hands moved to her shoulders, ran through her hair.

Like a hunter stalking prey, Reisa's lips approached the junction of his thighs, the tangle of dark hair, and the staff standing so proudly there. His breath caught as she brushed it lightly with her lips. Her tongue caressed it, tracing patterns down its burgeoning length, reaching deep into the tangled hair at its base, gently teasing and sucking on the mounds nestled there until they drew up tightly, and his shaft pulsed against her cheek. She drew back, directing her attention to the quivering shaft. Her mouth encircled its tip, lightly teasing with her tongue, sucking gently, feeling him grow even larger and harder, feeling the start of a surging pulse.

Then Reisa stood up, stretching invitingly before him. Apollo swept her up into his arms and fell with her onto the bed. He tried to draw her beneath him, but she resisted, twisting within his arms until he drew back, frowning.

Reisa sat up and with a triumphant laugh pushed him back to the bed. There was an almost feral look in her eyes, a gleam of challenge as she straddled him, lowering herself until his shaft was trapped between her hot wetness and his own belly. She moved teasingly, smiling down at Apollo, until his hands moved upward to caress the breasts swaying so temptingly above him. She gasped. Her breasts were aching, the nipples drawn to painful knots under his touch, but that touch fed the flame of her desire until she could no longer deny it. She raised herself until his shaft sprang free, then settled herself down upon it. Her eyes closed and her breath grew ragged as it slid into her, then she sat motionless, revelling in the feel of him deep inside her, feeling the pulse of his heart in the hard warmth within her.

Apollo caressed and kneaded her breasts as Reisa began to move rhythmically upon him. The fire in his body began to pool in his loins as she moved above him, eyes closed, breathing ragged as her movements quickened. He raised his head to suck and bite at her nipples, and her fingers clenched in the sheets. With a sudden cry, Reisa wrenched her body back into a convulsive arch, and his hands slid to her hips as they jerked uncontrollably against him, holding her still, lest her orgasm draw him to his. He wasn't done with her yet.

Centons later, Reisa lay limply on Apollo's chest, breath and pulse subsiding, as his hands gently caressed her. When she began to respond to his touch again, he rolled her beneath him; this time, she didn't resist. He kissed her, one hand fondling her breasts and running lightly over her thighs, slowly reigniting the fire, until Reisa grew restless, her breath quickening, her hips pushing upward into his. Her legs opened in wordless pleading, but he teased her, holding what she desired just beyond her reach, pinning her to the bed when she sought him, advancing, then withdrawing, ignoring her pleas. He bent his head to gently tongue her swollen breasts, rolling the nipples lightly between his lips, until her head thrashed back and forth in torment.

Then, with a sudden movement, Apollo drove himself deep within her. His thrusts were demanding, punishing, and she rose to meet them, fingers digging into the muscles of his arms. He laughed as she bucked beneath him, head thrown back as his thrusts sent the world exploding around her.

Apollo continued his deep thrusts, pushing her even higher until he could feel her muscles contract around him. He kept her there, until her moans became

mindless cries, then sent her into ecstasy. Afterward, he rested on his elbows, watching her as she made her way back to reality. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled weakly at him.

"Apollo..." she whispered, and one hand lifted to lightly brush his hair from his face.

He smiled and began moving again, long, slow, languorous strokes. Reisa moved with him, meeting him, running her hands over his back and buttocks, drawing his head down to hers to kiss him, a kiss that fed the fires consuming them.

Reisa gloried in the body so closely entwined with hers, the feel of that hard leanness pressed against her, muscles moving so smoothly beneath the sweat-slicked skin, the feel of him within her, hard, demanding, raising a surging fire in her loins that spread to engulf her entire body.

Apollo increased the speed of his thrusts, and Reisa moved beneath him, rotating her hips to meet him, legs raised until her heels locked at the small of his back. The fire of their passion grew, enveloping them until they moved mindlessly, lost in ancient and eternal rhythms.

Suddenly Apollo cried aloud, every muscle locking as he surged deep inside Reisa. The burning sensation sent her into her own climax. Convulsing muscles enveloped his pulsing shaft as they came together, each sending the other farther until they were totally unaware of anything but the blinding brilliance devouring them.

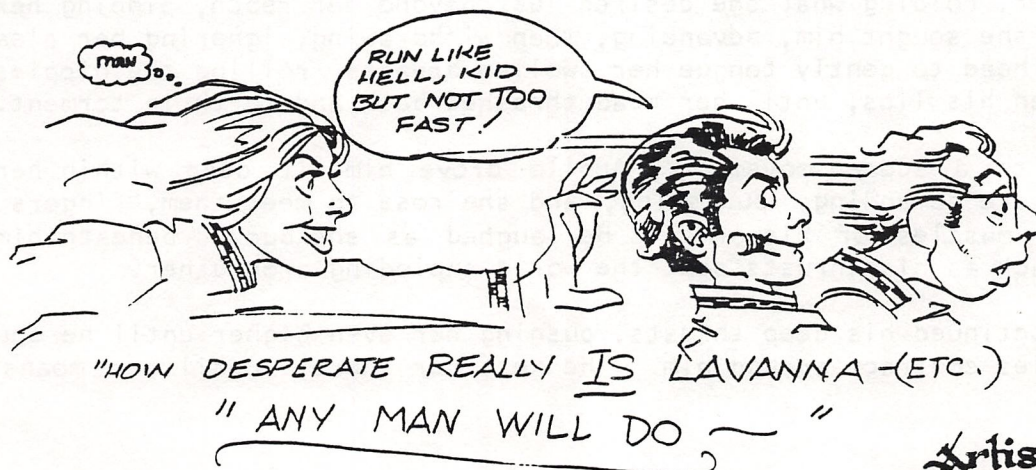
It was a long, slow, reluctant float back to reality. Apollo and Reisa lay entwined, the lean hardness of his body pillowed on hers. They grinned, and Apollo blew into her ear.

It tickled, and she batted him away, then tickled him back. But it didn't last -- their shared ecstasy had drained their energies, and they were still in its languorous grip. They lay curled together on the bed, the sheet drawn up as sweat-coated bodies cooled.

"Apollo..."

"Mmm..."

"I love you..." Then there was silence.





Ladies of the Evening

"Ladies of the Evening"

(By Sharon Monroe)

Alexandra strutted before her mirror, walking with an exaggerated hipswing. Her short, fringed skirt swung easily with her motions. The gauzy underskirt and the translucent blue blouse left little of her figure to the imagination. With an exotic combination of bright cosmetics and simple gold jewelry, she could pass on any of the Twelve Worlds. She turned once more to throw a pouting smile at Melantha, watching from the bed where she was sprawled with several tapes.

The black woman appeared to be in a bemused state of shock. "Alexandra, of all the stunts you've pulled, this has got to top them all. How did you let Starbuck talk you into it? You look like a Gemonese socialator!"

"Tonight, I am a Gemonese socialator. It should be fun." She giggled, swirling again, to practice a series of "come hither" facial gestures. "Are you sure you don't want to come along? I think you'll enjoy it, and I've already asked Starbuck if it'd be all right."

Melantha shook her head. "Alex, even if I wanted to, I could never throw together a costume like that on a centon's notice. What would I wear?"

"Well, it just so happens this is the real thing! I 'borrowed' it from Uncle Uri's country estate, the one my Aunt doesn't know about. He keeps a full wardrobe there."

She skipped to the closet, opened it, and pulled out a stunning white creation to display to Melantha. "And I counted on convincing you to come along, so I got something I know you'll look darling in!"

"You mean daring!"

"Come on, Mel, I know you."

Melantha struggled against the idea for a centon, then gave in with a wide grin.

"All right!" She jumped from the bed and grabbed the dress, already half stripped. "Where did you say Starbuck was going, anyway?"

"Well, there's a pyramid game going on near the space drome, the kind where professional wagerers and travelling spacers try to trade stories and steal each other blind. It's slightly illegal, from what Starbuck's heard, so no Cadet would ever get in. Thus, the cover. Tonight, he's a gambler from Virgon with cubits to burn!"

"Hey, that's not exactly the best part of town!"

Even lovely Caprica City had its less savoury sections, and some of the

freighter crews and travelling spacers could be quite wild and unruly.

"I'm not worried." Alexandra turned her leg, displaying a slender ankle in dark blue hose and light blue sandals. Also exposed was the short dagger sheathed on her thigh. "I think I know how to use this if I have to."

"From the days when women had to defend themselves against just about everybody? That must be ancient!"

"Just a copy." Alexandra giggled, dropped fringe over the blade. "Oh, here! I've got some bangles that'll look great with that!"

In a very few centons, Alexandra and Melantha both looked like they could handle any man life threw at them -- in more ways than one. They were both giggling, practicing walking and talking, when Starbuck knocked at the door.

He entered with a swagger, stopped short, and grinned in appreciation, nodding at the visions sizing him up as any socialator would, physically and financially. He passed on both counts. Alex and Mel sauntered over to drape themselves on either shoulder, running their fingers through his hair and cooing in his ears.

The close-fitting wagger's garments fit him to perfection. While Starbuck could turn feminine heads any time he wanted to, in these clothes he couldn't miss.

In a micron, all three were laughing.

"Well, Melantha, I see Aley convinced you to come along. Good. I talked Boomer into showing up later. He'll enjoy the company."

Melantha drew up short, startled. "Oh, no! I can't look like this!"

"Relax, he'll love you as much as I do." Starbuck's lips touched her throat, nipped gently. Then he turned to the pouting Alexandra, giving her the same treatment, but with a more prolonged dosage.

"Well, my ladies, if we leave now, we'll arrive when things are hitting their peak. Shall we go?"

He assisted them both in donning the long, light capes that were protection from weather and prying eyes. Then, arm in arm, they departed the Academy for a card game -- and a con game.

* * * * *

Starbuck passed muster at the entrance to the building with no problem. Melantha and Alexandra came in for closer scrutiny, but not because anyone was suspicious of their identities. Alex gave the guard an appraising smile and passed him by. Mel blew him a kiss with one hand as she linked the other in Starbuck's arm.

Inside the low-brow, hastily assembled gambling house, it didn't take Starbuck long to be dealt into a game. He sent Alex and Mel for ambrosia, telling them

to bring him a goblet as well. His new opponents watched appreciatively as they strolled away.

Melantha noticed a peculiar smile on Alexandra's face as they picked up the ambrosia. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"You'll never guess who's in the next room."

"Who?"

"My fine, upstanding, public-spirited uncle, Councilman Uri."

Melantha was only slightly shocked. "Isn't he running for re-election? What if he catches you here?"

"He's here, too. It could only hurt his campaign to be caught dragging his kicking and screaming niece from a place like this. Since he's here, I'm sure the right people have been paid."

"So we're not likely to get caught."

"No." She chuckled. "Let's get back to Starbuck. I'm not sure I like the leers in here."

Starbuck was having a winning night. The pile of cubits in front of him grew steadily. The amount of ambrosia consumed by the losers was large. The game continued.

Alexandra and Melantha were careful not to look at Starbuck's cards. Neither had a gambler's face, and their purpose here was purely decorative. They drank lightly, played with Starbuck's hair, flirted with the other patrons, and generally lost their inhibitions. By late in the evening, they were enjoying vamping the men in the room.

"By the way, who are your charming friends?" one man asked after losing a particularly large pot and being consoled by Alexandra, who was sitting on his lap and blowing in his ear.

Starbuck grinned, snapped his fingers, and pointed to the floor at his side. With a pout, Alex took her place next to him, opposite Melantha.

"These are Alex and Mel. They're good luck charms I picked up along the way."

"I can see that," the man laughed, eyeing the cubits in front of him. "Why two for you and none for us?"

"Some men can handle it, and others never get around to it," Starbuck replied, preparing to deal the next hand.

"We're always there when Starbuck has a night with the boys," said Melantha in a husky voice, smiling suggestively at the stranger, then blowing a curl of Starbuck's hair awry.

Alexandra just laughed. Both girls were feeling delightfully seductive, and

both were enjoying themselves immensely. All in all, the evening was quite amusing.

"I wonder," said another of the men, smiling, but with steel in his eyes and voice. Starbuck resolved to keep an eye on the stranger. He wasn't too friendly.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before Boomer strolled in. He was dressed in street clothes, looking like he belonged on the streets around them. He pretended not to know Starbuck or Alexandra, but he grabbed Melantha and steered her to his seat, then sent her to fetch ambrosia. Melantha cooed and slipped away.

Boomer could do an excellent imitation of an unsteady drunk when he wanted to, and he wanted to. The others were glad to deal in a man likely to lose his money fast.

Boomer and Starbuck were ready to back each other up if the need arose, and Alexandra and Melantha were capable of handling themselves against this bunch. No trouble arose.

The only thing disturbing their peaceful night was the entry, some time later, of Sire Uri. He strolled disdainfully into the room, a strange woman on his arm. He saw Alexandra, who waved to him, then he turned about ten shades of purple, choked, and beat a hasty retreat. She smiled and shrugged at the curious glances. "Old friend," she said sweetly.

Finally the game closed down. It was quite late, and most of the men were low on cubits. Starbuck had come out ahead, and Boomer had pulled in a modest sum with his drunk act. The four were reasonably sober.

They set out together, as if they were new friends of the evening. Boomer and Melantha walked together, with Starbuck and Alexandra behind them, snuggling together.

They separated near the Academy dorms. Boomer's offer to escort Melantha home was accepted. Starbuck didn't even ask, but began steering Alexandra toward his quarters.

"Where do you think we're going?" she asked archly.

"The night's still young, and I've had to watch you play up to everybody else all night. So now I'm wondering if you can follow through on the role."

He pulled her close, capturing her lips in a long kiss.

After a breathless moment, she pulled free. "Oh, really? Is it worth my time?"

"I'll make it worth your time."

Their bodies molded together in the shadow of a large bush. The gauzy robes hid nothing from Starbuck's probing hands, and his pants didn't hide the large bulge pressing against Alexandra.

"Out here?" She whispered the question.

"Why not?" was his low reply. He pulled her farther into the shadows, into the centre of a cluster of thick shrubs.

"It'll be more comfortable indoors."

"Later." At present, there were more important things than mere comfort to think about.

"Starbuck..." The name was a sigh as the man's practiced hands undid her blouse, then slipped inside. One hand rubbed over her breasts. Her nipples responded to the pressure, hardening as he lightly circled them with his forefinger. The other hand moved down her back, pulling her to him, finally dropping to stroke her thigh.

She no longer argued or fought -- Starbuck had convinced her this was a great place to make love. Her hands reached to unlace the bindings of his shirt.

"What's this?" Starbuck held a dagger in one hand, a vaguely perturbed look on his face.

"Protection," she whispered back.

"From me? Too bad it didn't work." He drove the dagger into the nearest tree and returned to more serious business.

"Wait," she said as his hand touched her body again. "You said I played the role well tonight. Let me finish it."

"Later."

"You'll like it."

He stepped back, smiling, and held out his hands. "I'm in your hands. Be gentle with me."

"You won't regret it, I promise."

"I'll make you keep it up until you get it right."

She pulled him down to kneel in the thick grass beside her. Tenderly, she began to unlace his shirt, fingers lingering over every touch. She slowly pushed the shirt back on his shoulders, thumbs running over his erect nipples as her fingers rippled over his muscular chest. Every hair seemed on end as she touched him. Her head moved, and she kissed him, many times, starting at each ear, moving down his throat, crossing his chest, lingering over pulse spots and his rapidly beating heart, moving down to his navel, teasing with her tongue as she felt her own pulse quicken.

Only then did she remove his shirt. His hands grabbed at her, but she caught them and pushed them down, offering her mouth for a long kiss of passion. She permitted him to kiss her throat and nibble at one ear before pulling away, smiling into his eager eyes.



Her hands reached down to stroke his thighs and tight groin. His breathing was heavier, audible in the bushes. Slowly, she unnotched his belt, pulled it free, and unzipped his pants. He sat up for a micron, pushed his pants low on his hips, and Alex's hands circled those hips, massaging, stroking, teasing his body. His erect organ sprang free and stood upright, quivering with a life of its own.

She licked and nibbled at that shaft as if it were some rare, delicate fruit. One hand moved free to softly stroke the hairy orbs dangling below, tightening at her touch.

Starbuck closed his eyes and leaned back against the tree, enjoying the wealth of sensations her mouth and hands were causing him. His hands pushed lightly on her head, encouraging her, then moved to stroke the soft hair falling across his body.

She stopped, sitting up and rocking back on her heels. There was fire in her eyes and desire in her smile. She laid aside the fringed skirt and began to undo the blue gauze blouse and underskirt.

Starbuck smiled lazily, then reached out to assist her.

"I'm not finished with you yet," she murmured.

"I hope not. Aley, if there's one thing I've never cared for, it's passive passion. I don't like it in my lovers, and I don't like it in myself."

His hands slipped across her breasts, smoothing the fabric of her blouse off her shoulders. His lips burned on her body.

It took half a centar to finish stripping each other, nibbling, stroking, exploring as they went, until they'd worked their bodies to a peak that demanded satisfaction. Moist, warm, aroused, they clung together as though their very souls depended on it.

"Starbuck?" she whispered entreatingly.

"Yes?"

"Now? Please?"

His laughing assent was almost a groan. His hands caught her wrists as she fell back into the grass. Then his body was atop hers, and she felt him thrust deep into her with one easy motion. Her gasp was matched by his deeper sigh.

His pelvis thrust against her, and she could feel his movements within her. Her fingers clenched convulsively, and her hips rotated sensuously against his. One leg stroked slowly up the back of his leg, then down, until her toes teased his soles.

"Ummm. Starbuck, did I ever tell you what a terrific lover you are?" she breathed.

"Frequently. But then, I've got such good inspiration."

She breathed a husky laugh, then suddenly gasped and bucked against him, throwing her head back to the lush grass, arching her back, nearly crying out. He released one of her wrists to catch her chin, covering her mouth with his, continuing the even stroking that had caused the violent reaction.

It was several centons before her breathing evened somewhat and her body relaxed to any degree. She opened her eyes to his pleased smile. Her heart was still pounding a rhythm she could feel him beginning to reach, as his thrusting pace increased ever so slightly, and he pressed more heavily on her.

"Oh, Starbuck..."

"I'm gonna have to keep you like this. It's the only time you don't argue with me."

"Wanna bet?" She laughed breathily, with an attempt at light easiness. It didn't succeed very well. His own breathing was much faster now, and she felt a beginning tide tingle through every nerve, radiating from the engorged organ demanding release of her.

Alexandra had never been able to deny Starbuck anything; she couldn't now. Her thoughts of teasing him sped away in the gentle night breeze. Stars above winked through the leafy canopy hiding them. Their bodies moved independent of thought, faster and faster as the urgency grew; and the more urgent their feelings, the more need for speed, the closer to an undefined edge they came.

Alexandra dropped over that edge with a soundless sob as she came again, Starbuck only a centon behind her, groaning his relief. They'd abandoned their minds to an almost animal passion, seeking only its own release, and they'd been rewarded with a physical ecstasy that left them both too drained to think of moving.

It was many long centons before Starbuck pulled away from Alexandra, lying beside her, blue eyes staring contentedly into brown ones. Finally Alex turned her head to look up, seeing by the stars that dawn was not far away.

"We should think about getting some sleep before classes today," she finally said, very softly. Somewhere a bird twittered a sweet song to the departing night.

"We aren't going to make classes today," Starbuck replied with a smile.

"Oh? Why?"

"Somewhere last night you said we'd be more comfortable indoors. You have to prove that yet. Besides, I know for a fact neither of us has anything important today, and if we did, Apollo would get it for me, and Io would get it for you."

"I don't know if I can take a day of you after a night like this."

He laughed, then was silent for several centons.

"I suppose we should get dressed and out of here before the morning drill teams start marching around or a watch stumbles on us or something," he said at last.

"We could go swimming first." In the very faint light, Starbuck could detect the glisten of sweat on her, knew he must be in the same condition.

"It would be a shame to go back like this, and waste the pond. Come on."

Hand in hand, naked, they dashed across the short expanse of path separating their grove from the grove next to one of the small ponds dotting the park. Starbuck dove in first.

Alexandra was more cautious and less skilled in water sports, so she waded in more carefully. Starbuck watched as the water deepened around her ankles, then her knees, lapping at her thighs. The waves were past her hips, nearly to her waist, when she suddenly dropped out of sight.

Starbuck laughed as she sputtered to the surface.

"Didn't I tell you it got deep in a hurry?"

She laughed back and splashed briskly at him.

"I might've known it was too good to last. You're up to your old tricks again," he retorted, smiling and splashing back.

"And you're one of them!"

He caught her before she swam very far, and ducked her head for her impudence.

They splashed and swam and played like children, staying near the protecting grove as the skies lightened still more. The stars slowly faded, and finally they knew it was time to go.

They slipped back to where they'd left their clothing, then waited several centons for the light breeze to dry their bodies before assisting each other in dressing, with much laughter and murmured endearments. As the sun peeked over the horizon, they strolled elegantly back to Starbuck's quarters. They encountered no one.

The day passed pleasantly enough. Starbuck and Alexandra were missed by several other cadets, but those people knew better than to ask foolish questions.

After dinner that evening, Io, Melantha, and Alexandra settled down to study.

Io turned to her two companions. "All right, you two," she announced. "Alex, I know you saw Starbuck last night, so I don't need to ask where you were, but, Mel, when do you start cutting whole days of classes?"

Alexandra stared in surprise at Melantha, a grin spreading across her face. "Mel! You and Boomer?"

Melantha pulled a pillow over her face, letting a slightly shamefaced smile sneak out.

Io glared from one girl to the other.

Alex laughed out loud.

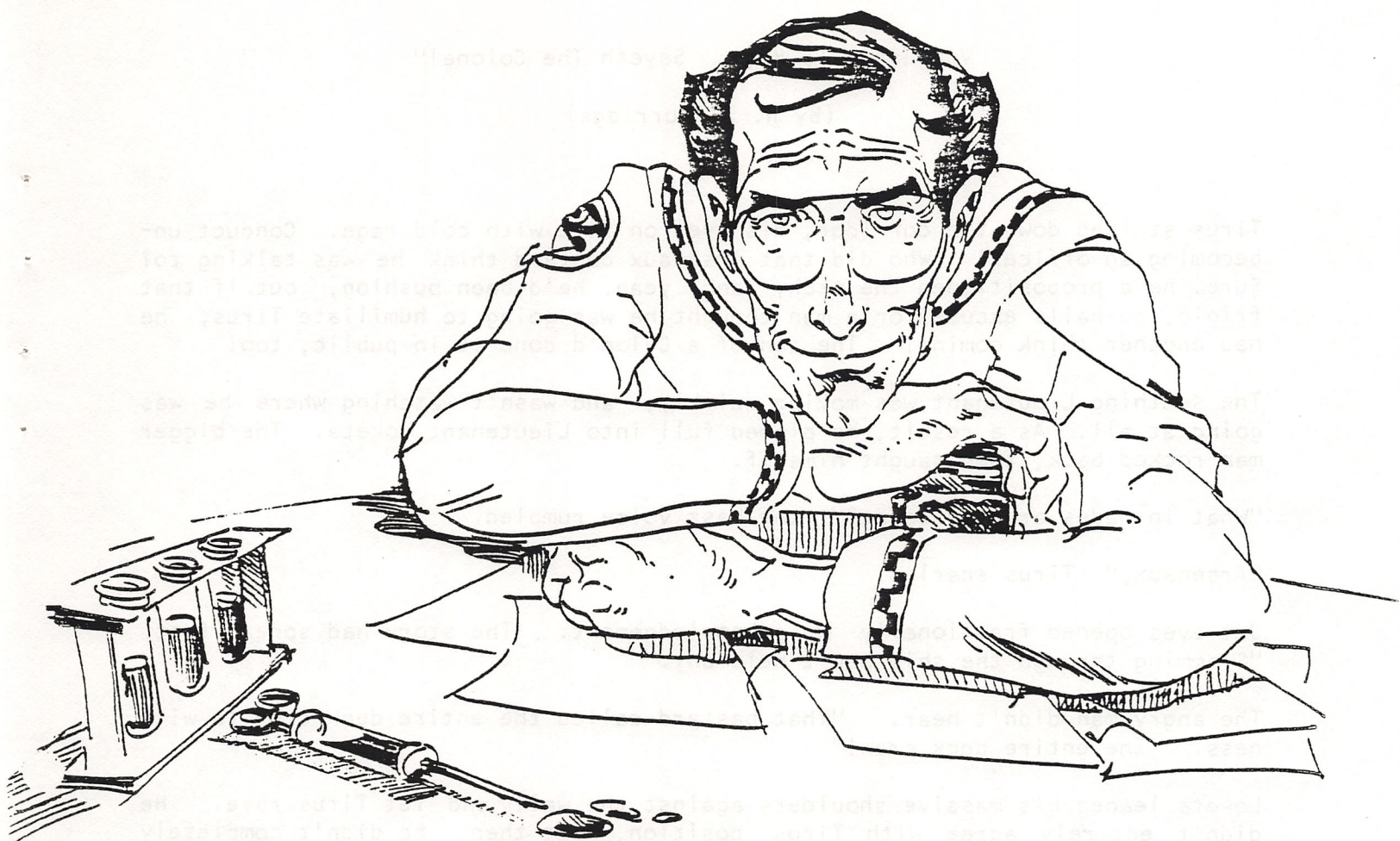
"Well, Alex, at least we got back to quarters!"

"Hey!"

Studies had to wait for over a centar before the story of the evening was satisfactorily told. But there were some things Alexandra and Melantha locked in their memories and never told.

It was a very astonished watchman who eventually found the peculiar dagger stuck into the tree. Analysis showed it to be a replication of an ancient weapon from Gemini. It was traced to a cadet at the Academy, and the knife eventually found its way back to Alexandra, who offered no explanation to the curious officer returning it. She merely smiled and thanked him.

This was one of the things she would never tell.



Vengeance Is Mine

By
n. J. BURRIDGE

Sayeth The Colonel

"Vengeance Is Mine, Sayeth The Colonel"

(By N. J. Burridge)

Tirus stalked down the corridor, his eyes on fire with cold rage. Conduct unbecoming an officer! Who did that Arsenaux bastard think he was talking to? Sure, he'd propositioned the tech, and, yeah, he'd been pushing, but if that frigid, no-balls excuse for a man thought he was going to humiliate Tirus, he had another think coming! The son of a Cylon'd done it in public, too!

The seething Lieutenant was moving quickly, and wasn't watching where he was going at all. As a result, he plowed full into Lieutenant Loketa. The bigger man rocked back, then caught himself.

"What in Hades are you doing?" the bass voice rumbled.

"Arsenaux," Tirus snarled.

Jet eyes opened fractionally in acknowledgement. The story had spread fast. "Slamming through the ship won't help any."

The angry man didn't hear. "That bastard called the entire deck crew to witness. The entire deck crew!"

Loketa leaned his massive shoulders against the wall and let Tirus rave. He didn't entirely agree with Tirus' position, but then, he didn't completely disagree, either. And Colonel No-No was a royal pain in the ass, anyway. The good Colonel had no sense of humour and vehemently denied the old adage about rank having its privileges. No-No always put it as rank having its golmongering responsibilities instead.

As Tirus continued to spit steam, however, Loketa began to find the whole thing amusing. He could picture Tirus forced to stand and take what the Colonel handed out -- with proper formality, of course. The scene appealed to his admittedly warped sense of humour.

Still, Tirus was a useful man, in a malicious, underhanded sort of way, and it wouldn't do to let Arsenaux inhibit him.

"I'll pay him," Tirus was still foaming. "I'll pay him good."

That sounded promising. "How?" Loketa asked, loud enough to catch the other man's attention.

"I don't know yet. But it's got to be good. The ball-less bastard's got to pay."

Even more promising. Now for some prompting. "Ball-less, you say?" Loketa inquired. "How'd you come to learn that?"

"Huh?" Tirus stopped cold.

"That he's ball-less?" the big man repeated.

"He's got to be," Tirus snapped, then added with a sneer, "You know how the girls talk. Well, nobody's ever mentioned getting the Colonel. That's in the entire four yahrens of the mission, mind you. What kind of man goes four yahrens sleeping alone?"

"One with no balls," Loketa admitted.

"Yeah, no..." Tirus quit talking aloud, but Loketa could almost see the circuits heating in his brain.

"Lavanna." The smile on the smaller man's face was very unpleasant.

"Lavanna? What's she got to do with paying Arsenaux?"

"Our friendly med tech is mistress of the medicine chest."

The huge head nodded. "I know. So what?"

"We need some Libran Joy Juice," Tirus explained happily.

The pieces fell into place. There was no stronger aphrodisiac known to the human race. Two drops in a man's ambrosia, and he'd perform all night. Loketa tried to picture an aroused Arsenaux. His knowledge of the man simply wouldn't let the picture form. He chuckled. Yeah, it would be a good payback for the prig. He did pity the girl the Colonel got hold of, though. Was she in for one Hades of a rough night!

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Lavanna swished the solution in the glass carefully.

"This is potent stuff, Loketa. Are you sure you want to use this on Tirus? I mean, he's a big enough bastard without it."

"I'm sure. Besides, he's going to be locked in an empty room."

The med tech stared, then laughed. "Oh, boy, will that serve him right." She measured three drops into a small beaker. "Here you go. Just let me know how it turns out."

Loketa smiled grimly. "I'll do that."

* * * * *

The evening's party, although not formally declared such, was well underway before Colonel Arsenaux dropped in. Tirus had been limiting his intake of ambrosia and was correspondingly in a stinking mood. The only thing keeping him from starting some kind of trouble was the silent presence of Loketa and the anticipation of the "fun" to come.

The pair of predators watched the Colonel. Arsenaux circulated through the groups, dropping a word here and there, but he wasn't sitting and drinking. Tirus let his eyes fall, appearing to be absorbed in his glass when the Colonel passed. Finally the man sat down -- and, oh, so conveniently, at a table with three girls. As the first drinks started for the table, Tirus half-rose. Loketa reached out, and a powerful hand hauled Tirus back.

"Wait. Let them drink a few rounds. Joy Juice works best over an alcohol base."

"Who cares how it works best?" Tirus hissed. "I just want it to work."

"You fraking frimp! Only a starved daggit wastes an opportunity like this," the deep voice rumbled. "Sit down!"

In the end he offered the pilot no choice, and Tirus found himself forcibly put back in his seat. Hungrily, he watched the glasses empty, be replaced, and empty again. By the fourth round, he was getting more than a little impatient. Then, as the fifth round passed their table, Loketa let go of him.

Tirus was on his feet immediately. Three quick strides brought him in front of the barman. The startled man swung his loaded tray aside to avoid a collision with the notoriously short-tempered Viper pilot. Tirus stepped aside and, as the tray passed, squirted the liquid into the only mug of Midori the man was carrying. Arsenaux's fondness for the green liqueur was well known.

The smile on Tirus' face told Loketa the Joy Juice was on its way. "A good shot?" Loketa asked.

"Right in the Midori," Tirus replied triumphantly.

Loketa froze. "The Midori? What!? Weren't you paying any attention? Arsenaux's been drinking ambrosia all night!"

Tirus stared at the other man. "You're kidding," he said in a small voice.

"No!" Loketa whipped out of his chair. Who was drinking Midori? This was going sour, very quickly. In a cold anger, he moved toward Arsenaux's table. He was too late. One of the girls, he didn't know which one, was already working on the glass. Frak! He stopped in momentary indecision, then headed for the door. There was an antidote for the stuff, and he'd better get it from Lavanna before it hit the girl. He didn't know how he'd get it to her, but this wasn't funny any more. On the way, he snatched Tirus out of his seat. The stupid daggit wouldn't hesitate to help himself to that woman. Loketa was only after Arsenaux; he wasn't about to let some innocent bystander get messed up.

"Where in Hades are we going?" Tirus demanded as they cleared the door.

"Life Centre," Loketa snapped.

"Why? Hey, the drink went wrong, but there's going to be one hot little number available soon, and I don't plan to waste her on Arsenaux."

Loketa stopped. His face, normally on the grim side, was as hard as a slammed door. "Listen, you, I agreed to tag the Colonel, who richly deserves it. I'm not setting some green kid up for your perverted pleasure."

Tirus tried to jerk free. "Listen, yourself. I'm not wasting an opportunity like this..."

"Oh, yes, you are."

Tirus never saw the massive fist that broke his jaw. "Now I've got a reason to call on Lavanna. Too bad you can't appreciate it, Tirus."

Loketa slung the limp body over one shoulder and lengthened his stride.

* * * * *

Yummm! Midori was good! Trav blinked at the glass. She shouldn't have drunk the stuff; she'd already had two drinks, and that was always quite enough, thank you, but Arsenaux recommended it. She was already feeling good simply because the Colonel was talking to her. It had been almost two sectars since he'd helped her put her life in some sort of perspective. He'd thanked her the next morning, and hadn't come close since. As far as she was concerned, that wasn't fair. It wouldn't do to chase the man -- his reputation for distance was earned.

Thinking about the Colonel led to thinking about that night. Thinking about that evening's activities was giving her a good, warm feeling. Looking at the man made the feeling spread, then localise. Frak, but this would be a good night for a replay. The ambrosia mug was suddenly pushed aside. Trav realised with a start that Arsenaux was leaving. The warm feeling was getting warmer. She let him clear the door, then, without a word to Cassandra or Mirva, rose to follow him. Lords, the room was hot!

* * * * *

Loketa strode into Life Centre. "Lavanna!" It was almost a shout.

"Shut up!" the med tech's voice yelled back.

"Get your ass in here," the mechanic ordered, albeit in a quieter tone of voice.

Lavanna stormed into the main examination room, blonde hair standing in spikes and dress awry. "What in Hades do you want now? I've got important things to do."

Looking at her disarray, Loketa decided she probably did have important things to do. "I'm sorry," he said placatingly, "but I had a little problem tonight."

"Yeah," she agreed as she realised whom he was carrying and the shape the pa-

tient's jaw was in. "I'll say you did."

"You can have this one for a while." The med tech watched as the Lieutenant dumped Tirus onto a bed. "I need the antidote for the Joy Juice. It got the wrong person."

"It what? You grime-sucking son of a Scorpian streetwalker! Who got it?" Lavanna was snarling as she hastily sorted through the bottles in a small cabinet.

"I don't know the girl. Someone we picked up from the Colonies, I think."

"Great! You'll pay for this. If I get tagged for it, you'll go down with me."

"Save the threats," Loketa rumbled. "Just give me that antidote before the stuff hits the kid."

"Here, and you'd better pray she isn't Arian. Joy Juice hits those people hard, harder than any other planetary type. If she's Arian, she'll be long gone before you get back."

"Wonderful." Loketa snatched the small vial and ran from the room.

Lavanna stared at Tirus. This was the bastard who'd started everything in the first place. She shot one quick glance at the darkened room behind her. The bone laser was in there, and it wasn't alone. Well, Tirus could wait. He'd earned it, anyway. But she did wire the jaw in place before returning to her interrupted evening.

* * * * *

Arsenaux put his second boot beside the first in the closet, then yawned. It had been a long day, and a pretty decent little party. The tap on his door was completely unexpected. Irritated -- and barefooted -- the Colonel answered the door. It was Trav.

He stared at her in complete surprise. The expression on the girl's face was unmistakable. She gave him no chance to refuse; he'd never seen anyone come through a door so fast before in his life.

A bit angry, Arsenaux turned to catch her. Instead, she caught him. The resulting kiss surprised him even more. Then her hands were on his tunic, and it surrendered rapidly.

What was the matter with the girl? One hand defended his belt, as the other tilted her head back. He intended to ask her what she thought she was doing -- then he caught sight of her eyes. The pupils were pinpoints in the hazel irises. His own eyes widened. Libran Joy Juice! Oh, Lords, how'd she get that? Who slipped it to her? He was very sure she hadn't taken it knowingly. Trav was many things, but wanton wasn't one of them. He'd learned that the last time -- the things she hadn't known were appalling.



He lost the battle of the belt, and shortly thereafter, the skirmish of the pants. Then he quit trying. There wasn't a hope in Hades of stopping her without the antidote, and she wasn't likely to let him go get it.

Trav's hands moved with a sureness he'd taught her himself. In scant centons, Arsenaux found his own need matching hers. Her lovely, backless blue dress went the way of his uniform.

There wasn't time to make it to the bed. Instead, he bent her to the rug and shoved her face down. Given the nature of Joy Juice, the longer he maintained control, the better.

Keeping control proved difficult. What the girl wanted, she wanted now. It taxed his skills beyond the limits he thought he had. When he triggered her seventh release -- by hand -- and she wasn't done, he began to get concerned. Was she Arian, or even part Arian? Joy Juice would keep an Arian woman up all night, and long past dawn. He wasn't sure he'd last that long. With a sudden jolt he remembered Trav telling him that, yes, indeed, she was part Arian. He resigned himself to a very long evening. More and more, he began to rely on hands and mouth. He also began to savagely curse the bastard who'd done this.

Trav was happy -- not satisfied, but very happy. Lords, this was good, even if he wouldn't let her roll over on her back. There was almost no coherent thought in her mind, just tingling warmth. Then the warmth fired to heat again.

* * * * *

Loketa swung into the Officers' Club and slammed to a halt. The girl was gone. His stomach hit his boots. Where had she gone? The two girls she'd been with were still there. Only then did Loketa notice Arsenaux was also gone. Oh, great! If that crazy-drugged girl assaulted the Colonel, there'd be Hades to pay. Lords, had this little boobytrap gone off with a bang!

Hoping against hope, the massive Lieutenant moved with the speed and grace of a bast. Maybe one of the remaining girls would know where the third one'd gone.

"Hi, Loketa," the mousy girl named Mirva greeted him cheerfully.

"Hi, kid." The worry in his voice startled both women. "Where'd your girl-friend go?"

"Why?" It was the dark-haired one.

"Look, I'm not going to explain, beyond saying a rather nasty joke got badly misplaced. Now, where is she?"

Cassandra studied the six-foot-plus monster before her. This would be a bad man to cross, but right now he was a badly worried one. Her eyes narrowed. A nasty joke gone awry, huh?

"She followed Colonel Arsenaux, I believe," the engineer told him.

A lot of the colour drained from his face. "That's what I was afraid of. Thanks."

Loketa practically ran from the room. Oh, Lords! Not Colonel No-No! Arsenaux was a hopeless prig!

* * * * *

The "hopeless prig" had his hands full -- of Trav. Exhaustion was beginning to slow her down, but it was working against him as well. He'd used every trick he knew, some more than once, and she still wanted him. Oh, but she was a sturdy girl!

Trav was still tingling, a bit less, but still there. Oh, my, yes! The night wasn't over yet. She was aware of muscles that were beginning to protest, but she ignored them. It didn't matter if she walked bow-legged for a section. This was worth it!

* * * * *

The blank door to Colonel Arsenaux's quarters stood in front of him. Loketa leaned against it, trying to hear if there was anyone in there. Nothing. Frak, where were they? Then he heard a very muted shriek. His eyes closed. Oh, Lords, please let that be the girl!

Arsenaux let Trav slide to the floor. She was temporarily quiet. But it wouldn't last, unfortunately. The sharp rap on the door made him jump. Someone's timing was simply awful. He decided to ignore it.

He heard a small click and realised the door was no longer completely closed. Before he could frame a blistering order to leave, a deep, desperate voice said, "Please, sir! This is the antidote for Libran Joy Juice. According to Mirva, that is, she said this girl, uh, I think you can use it, sir."

Arsenaux saw a huge hand, attached to a massive wrist and forearm, extend in the door. There was a small vial in that hand. He looked down. Trav was still quiet.

"Yes, I can, Lieutenant Loketa, and I'll see you in my office at fifteen hundred centars." Arsenaux reached across the prone girl and snatched the bottle. "Now, get out -- and relock that door!"

"Yes, sir!"

The hand vanished, but before the door completely closed the Colonel caught a final phrase. "I'm gonna kill you, Tirus, just you wait and see. Right after Lavanna fixes that jaw, I'm gonna kill you."

Tirus! The Colonel's language grew as inventive as his lovemaking. Yes, indeed, Tirus would regret this piece of dirty work.

Trav languidly opened both eyes. Where was Arsenaux? Ah, there he was. She rolled over and snuck up on him from behind. Gottcha!

Arsenaux almost dropped the antidote. Lords, no, she couldn't... She could. She did. The small vial sat unused one last time.

Finally, he managed to get her in front of him, and in a state of calm, both at the same time. He popped the stopper out of the bottle and offered it to her. Obediently, Trav swallowed it, and sat bolt upright a centon later, eyes wide open. Then she went bonelessly limp, and her eyes closed. Microns later, she was deeply asleep.

Arsenaux sighed in relief. Then he looked at her, then the bed, and back to her. No, it was too high. He dragged the blankets onto the floor, pulled them over the two of them, and immediately fell asleep himself.

* * * * *

Promptly at fifteen hundred centars, Lieutenant Loketa walked briskly into the office of Colonel No-No. At fifteen-thirty centars, he slunk out, followed by the selfsame Colonel and a rather worn Lieutenant who walked somewhat stiffly. At fifteen-forty centars, the oddly assorted trio entered Life Centre. It was over a full centar before they left; then, they were five.

Tirus awoke slowly, feeling like Hades. Blearily, he looked around. Where was he? The room was perhaps fifteen by twenty feet, and totally empty. No, that was wrong; there was a small tape player by his head.

He blinked at it, realising it was on the floor. Therefore, he was on the floor, too. Tirus also discovered he was very uncomfortable. His face hurt something fierce, and his entire groin was feeling tight and hot. In a few microns, he discovered the heat was spreading slowly, the tightness becoming almost painful.

The Lieutenant triggered the tape. Maybe it would have an explanation. He started in fear when Arsenaux's voice addressed him.

"Lieutenant Tirus, in return for your thoughtful but misguided efforts last night, I've had a rather unique set of chemicals mixed up. One is Joy Juice; I'm sure you're familiar with it. The other is a little-known drug called 'Inhib.' You will experience all the joys of Joy Juice, and you will be completely unable to obtain relief."

Tirus listened in growing horror and bodily excitement as the Colonel's polite voice continued.

"To prevent your, ah, frustrations from upsetting the rest of the crew, I've placed you here and set a timelock on the door. Understand me -- there is a complete report on last night's incident in my possession. I've not given it to the Commander. I cannot recommend your trying anything vindictive after your release from here, however. Have a bitch of a day."

Through a haze of pounding desire, Tirus saw the tape suddenly fizzle and smoke. In microns, it was gone. Full and hard now, he was trapped -- alone while the drugs cheerfully played chemical warfare through his body. It was indeed a very long day.

Circumstances Require...



by
Anne Cecil

"Circumstances Require..."

(By Anne Cecil)

"But I was a socialator! And a good one!" Cassiopeia's blue eyes danced with exasperation. Every line of her shapely body expressed defiance, from the neatly shod boots planted firmly on the concrete to the curly blonde head flung back to confront Apollo's gaze. The ragged tear in her trousers and the missing sleeve did not detract from the effectiveness of her posture.

"You're a med tech now." Apollo unconsciously stiffened his shoulders and deepened his tone. "We're not so desperate that we need to resort to that kind of tactic. This is only the fourth day we've been here."

"And we could be here for thirty, for all we know! We haven't learned one useful thing in all that time."

"She's right, Captain," the third member of the group said reluctantly.

"Jolly, stay out of this!" Apollo snapped, and added, after a glance at the stocky Warrior's face, "That's an order."

Jolly heaved himself from the metal bunk where he'd been sitting. "I'm sorry, Captain," he said quietly. "But she is right. This whole situation's crazy from the first, when these Nossans invited us in through their famous invulnerable screen without asking for any real identification."

"We told them we're from the GALACTICA." Apollo's tone made it clear that should have satisfied anyone.

"But they never asked for any proof," Jolly shot back. "We could've been some of Baltar's pals, handing them pure felgercarb. Crashing the shuttle, that was the fault of this fraking double sun system... Excuse me, Cass." He ducked his head toward the unembarrassed woman. "But hustling us out of the wreck and tossing us like common criminals into this hole..."

Disgust made him temporarily speechless, and he waved an arm to encompass the grey-walled cell, barren of decoration or furniture except for the three metal beds, the cell door with the regulation call box, and a discreet archway leading to the sanitary facilities. Finally, Jolly continued, his mustache quivering with thinly suppressed anger. "And that once-a-day question session! The same questions -- Who are we? Why're we here? What do we want? -- for fifteen centons exactly. No answers to our questions, no comments, no responses, just those four stony faces watching us like they expected us to disappear or something! We don't know any more now than we did after that first session three days ago!"

"It makes no sense!" Apollo fumed, absently rubbing at the healing cut on his left temple. His handsome face twisted into a scowl, and he turned as if

to begin pacing the length of their cell again. "This is a human outpost! We're allies! Even if they won't tell us the secret of their defence screen, they shouldn't be treating us like this!"

"In any case," Jolly said loudly, pulling him back, "we can't just sit around waiting. Cass's right about the looks she's been getting from that dark-haired guy. He can't keep his eyes off her, particularly where her uniform's torn." Jolly rubbed at his mustache as he slid his eyes sideways toward Cassiopeia.

Apollo swung away, then turned back again, one arm outflung as if presenting a solution. "If there's no word from us in another day, the GALACTICA'll come looking."

Jolly put his hands on his hips, unconsciously matching Cassiopeia's pose. "If they haven't been attacked by Cylons. And even if they do, how're they going to get through the screen no Cylons've been able to dent? For that matter, how're they even going to know we're here, if the Nossans deny ever seeing us?"

Apollo sighed, slumping a little. He looked directly at Cassiopeia and said softly, "What about Starbuck?"

Cassiopeia smiled sweetly, knowing she'd won. "Starbuck will understand," she said confidently.

Apollo cast his eyes upward, as if in appeal, and turned away with a gesture that announced his retirement from the argument.

Cassiopeia marched across the cell to the door, her shoulders held proudly straight. She pulled open the cover of the call box, which droned out the formula request, "Do you wish to confess?"

Speaking carefully and clearly into the mechanical receiver, she repeated the prisoner's formula response. "I wish to confess."

* * * * *

"They've been in there four days! Why haven't they used the turbowash?" The small man's voice had a plaintive whine.

"Because they're Cylon androids, of course!" The thickset man facing him banged his fist on the table decisively, then looked smugly at the other men present.

The youngest man raised deep-set dark eyes from the holocube he'd been studying and said mildly, "Tarosh, we can't afford a mistake." The natural resonance of his voice gave it a compelling emphasis. "The one who calls himself Apollo does bear a strong resemblance to this old holo of Adama. If they are telling the truth, and there is still a battlestar in existence, a battlestar commanded by a vengeful father could damage us as badly as a Cylon base star." He turned the holocube idly back and forth between long fingers.

"Miklos, you worry about eventualities that may never come!" The thickset man banged the table again and spoke quickly, too loudly, as if already regretting his words. "Perhaps if you'd been worrying more about what's actually happening, we wouldn't be in such bad shape!"

"Tarosh!" The small man darted nervous glances toward Miklos, as the fourth man spoke. "No one could've foreseen the Cylons would develop an android that could so perfectly counterfeit human form. Had it not been for the automatic cut-off switches Miklos had installed, more of our defence screen would've been destroyed by the sabotage, perhaps beyond repair." Reproach clouded the blue eyes peering out from the wrinkled face of the elderly Councillor.

"It's all right, Mentor," the young man said, waving a hand in a pacifying gesture. "Tarosh has a right to be impatient. We must decide, and soon, whether to destroy these strangers or enlist them as allies. Delaying too long could be fatal, regardless of what they are."

"Now, Miklos," the elderly man cautioned, "surely you're not becoming impatient, too. We have them well-confined. What damage could they do? Another few days..."

The young man tossed his head, settling his wavy dark hair back decisively. "If they are Cylon androids, they may have some kind of signalling apparatus we can't detect. They may be the advance for a new attack force -- and you know what will happen once they discover we're no longer invulnerable."

"That's why we've got to destroy 'em!" Tarosh raised a fist to bang again, but stopped at a look from those suddenly hard brown eyes.

Miklos continued coolly, as if there'd been no interruption. "If they aren't Cylons, but in fact Colonial Warriors, and they feel ill-treated, we could find ourselves losing an ally we sorely need. But... We cannot show them any trust until we're certain they are exactly what they claim."

"Why don't they use the turbowash?" The small man's refrain had become almost a moan.

Miklos shrugged. "Perhaps they're members of one of the older sects that have taboos about disrobing in the same room as a member of the opposite sex."

Tarosh snorted derisively. "Otari? As Warriors? They'd have had any nonsense like that knocked out of them long before they left the Academy!"

"Perhaps they just don't feel the need of a turbowash." Miklos frowned, then waved a hand again. "We don't have any reason to think the Cylons've discovered the explosive effect a sonic turbowash has on their creations, since the one that exposed the fact to us was in no condition to report back to its masters."

The elderly Mentor sighed sadly. "Pity the thing wasn't forced to take a turbowash before it had a chance to start sabotaging the screen controls."

"No point in wishing things different than they are," huffed Tarosh.

"True enough." Miklos pushed back his chair and stood, in a single smooth motion. "We can't wait any longer. I've decided to conduct a private interview with the woman."

Tarosh's bushy eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing. Mentor, his voice full of concern, said, "Miklos, don't be rash."

"Are you going to force her in the turbowash?" The small man's eyes were wide with eager curiosity.

"I should be able to find a more diplomatic way to achieve it," Miklos said judiciously.

"Miklos, that could be dangerous!" Mentor was clearly worried. "If you should be nearby, and she is a Cylon android... My boy, you could be severely hurt."

The expression on Tarosh's face was a mixture of alarm and admiration. He smiled abruptly, a sly quirk of his thick lips. "And if she's no android, you could be in a different kind of danger, hmmm? How long's it been since that wife of yours died, two yahrens now?"

The tightening of his lips and the cold look in his brown eyes were the only signs of Miklos' pain at the reminder. His voice was even enough as he said, "It is a risk that must be taken, for the sake of this outpost."

"But surely not by you, Miklos!" Mentor's voice quavered slightly in his agitation. "We could not afford to lose you. Without your leadership to inspire us, we could not keep our people united against the relentless pressure of the enemy."

"As well by me as anyone," Miklos retorted.

"No, no," the small man spoke up, his voice plaintive once more. "Mentor is right; surely someone else must be found."

"Are you volunteering?" Miklos asked dryly.

"Oh, no!" The small man shrank back, managing to become even smaller. His refrain became a wail. "If only they'd use the turbowash!"

Miklos moved impatiently, stepping back from the table. "It must be someone who knows the secret," he pointed out, moving along the table toward the opposite end. "If any of our brave citizens discover their protective screen is damaged..." He let his words hang suggestively, heavy with irony.

"Perhaps I could talk with the one who claims to be Adama's son." Mentor stiffened his voice and posture by an obvious act of will. "I might invite him to share my private bathing facilities, and naturally suggest a turbowash before entering the pool."

Miklos looked at the elderly Councillor with affectionate respect. "That's a brave offer, Mentor, but you'd need fast reflexes to carry it out. Now..."

He was interrupted by the sound of the door alarm. The young messenger who entered was flushed with excitement. "Sires! The woman prisoner has asked to confess! She requested that her confession be taken personally by you, sire!" He looked directly at Miklos.

Tarosh broke in before Miklos could comment. "She asked for Sire Miklos by name?"

The messenger flushed again. "No, sire, she gave us a description." At the inquiring looks from the four Councillors, the boy's colour deepened, but he continued. "She said, uh, she said she wanted the young, handsome one with the dark hair and beautiful eyes."

"It seems," Miklos remarked, controlling a smile, "that my plan has been chosen by our guests. Tell the captain of the guard to show the woman to my private quarters. I'll meet them there."

* * * * *

Cassiopeia perched on the arm of a couch, her hands arranged in her lap with both palms upward, waiting with no outward sign of nervousness or impatience, as her Gemonese instructors had schooled her so long ago.

Her guard paced back and forth, fixing his eyes dutifully on her, as if she might attack him at any centon.

Unobtrusively, she surveyed the room. It was an unexpected place for a prisoner interview, since it was clearly not a public room. It resembled a frame without a subject -- two long, low couches covered with royal blue fabric were set perpendicular to the entrance, flanking a low oval table of some light wood. The same wood covered the walls, broken only by two doors placed neatly to the far right, and by small, intricate paintings grouped in the Libran manner.

Behind the table, facing the entrance, stood a massive armchair, high-backed, with flared carvings in a darker wood surrounding off-white upholstery that matched the colour of the deep-piled carpeting. This chair was the focal point of the room; all that was missing was the personage it was designed to show off.

The door in the foyer slid open, and the guard turned to salute. The man who entered was unquestionably the dark-haired interrogator she'd demanded to see -- but Cassiopeia felt an initial shock as she realised, seeing him beside the guard, that his height barely topped her own. He'd seemed larger, somehow, alongside the other interrogators on the opposite side of that table.

Miklos dismissed the guard and moved down the steps to stand before her. He wore a loose tunic and drab trousers of flat brown, obviously a uniform, since the other men had worn the same. The dull fabric highlighted the vivid brown of his eyes. They dominated a face that narrowed to a small cleft chin. His mouth was small as well, but with perfectly formed lips, unusually even. He moved his head to toss back his wavy brown hair in what she decided must be a

characteristic gesture, and she was impressed again by the unstudied grace of his movements.

"Will you not sit?" He extended an arm in an almost formal invitation. "I'm sure you'll find the couch more comfortable." The vibrancy of that deeply masculine voice stirred responses within her, but she kept her face carefully bland.

Cassiopeia stood in an even flow of movement and faced him directly. "As a prisoner, sire, I find your concern for my comfort most appreciated." She lowered her head slightly, letting him see her eyes veiled by her long lashes.

Miklos raised an eyebrow. Instead of stepping back, as she'd expected, he moved forward to decrease the space between them. "I am concerned for your comfort, particularly now that you've decided to cooperate with us."

Moving abruptly, before he could react, Cassiopeia swung around, brushing hip and thigh against him, then crossed to the farther couch. As she slid into the soft cushions, she glanced back to see him standing rigid, his elegant mouth pursed as he considered her.

"Why don't you join me?" She laid a hand gently on the cushion beside her, pressing into its softness and arching her back slightly, but keeping her blue eyes innocent of obvious invitation.

He spoke with sudden sharpness, as if he'd had a change in plans. "I've been a poor host. Surely you must be uncomfortable in that uniform, torn as it is. I'm sure I can find you something more attractive. Perhaps you'd enjoy a turbowash while I get it? And then we can talk over some refreshment." He smiled, a curve of those perfect lips that did nothing to warm the calculating brown eyes. "The turbowash is through there." He pointed to the nearer of the two doors.

The emphasis was unmistakable; he wanted her to go through that door. Every instinct warned her against it. What kind of man was this?

She smiled up at him, letting her lashes veil her eyes again, so he wouldn't see the suspicion in them. "I certainly would like to get out of this outfit," she said, lifting a piece of the ripped pants leg to expose a bit more flesh. "I'm afraid it's damaged beyond repair."

He took a few steps forward, his eyes exuding a smug confidence. "I'll just get you a robe while you're in the turbowash." He held out an arm, inviting her to go first.

Clearly there was some surprise beyond the door, probably unpleasant. The arrangement of the room, the man himself, with his sensual mouth and intense eyes, made stories of odd Libran sects flash through her mind -- sects where they mixed pleasure and pain, where they believed sexual excitement was greatly heightened by sadistic foreplay.

Cassiopeia laughed, throwing back her head and exposing her long white throat. "I feel so delicious here," she purred at him, burrowing back against the

cushions in apparent pleasure. She raised one booted foot and brought the other up to slowly push the boot off the first. Freed of the boot, she wiggled her naked toes and arched the dainty foot, then rubbed it up along the other calf.

Those deep-set eyes followed every movement as she leaned forward, sliding her hands down her thigh and calf to the remaining boot, which she eased off ever so slowly. Then she leaned back, stretching both legs out and giving a small sigh of pleasure.

The effect on the watcher was exactly what she'd intended. His eyes seemed darker, wider, and his lips parted. His eyes met hers, and for a moment there was an electric tension between them. He broke it, shaking his head in a quick movement as if to clear it, which brought a satisfied smile to her face.

Miklos walked to the high-backed chair and bent to press controls set into the right arm. Cassiopeia noticed again how smooth and sure his movements were, with a natural grace like a panther's.

The centre of the low table dilated, and from below rose a flask filled with ruby liquid, and two fluted glasses. He moved quickly to the table and lifted the flask to eye level, peering deeply into it as if to measure the quality by some close inspection. Apparently it was acceptable, since he bent, half-kneeling, and poured some of the liquid into each glass. He set the flask down and, watching her closely, raised one of the glasses to his lips to drink perhaps a swallow. Still keeping his eyes on her face, he picked up the other glass and carried them both around the table to her.

"Some Libran wine?" he offered, holding out one glass. Those expressive eyes held an indefinable touch of some emotion -- Fear? Amusement? She reached up, warily awaiting something, and as she touched the glass, he tipped it and spilled half its contents onto her lap.

She stood instantly, even as he was mumbling some excuse about being clumsy, and managed to grab his arm and shove, so the contents of his glass splattered over his tunic.

"Oh, dear! I'm so sorry!" Cassiopeia was sure he believed that about as much as she believed he'd been clumsy. "Here, let me help," she said sweetly, dabbing at his tunic with her remaining sleeve. "Oh, I'm afraid it's staining. You'll just have to take it off." She slid her fingers down the seam on the side, pulling the tunic aside to reveal a well-muscled torso, with a light matting of fine brown hair on his chest.

Miklos jerked back, and then he stopped and laughed, a rich, joyous sound that made her want to laugh with him. "It seems we're both in need of a change," he conceded, shrugging the tunic the rest of the way off. The smooth swell of his biceps testified to some program of regular exercise; square shoulders topped the handsome chest, which tapered to a narrow waist. Below that were the loose trousers of his uniform.

"Your turn," he grinned, holding out an arm for her stained outfit. His brown eyes still glowed with delight at the joke.

Cassiopeia moved slowly, with feigned shyness, to unfasten the remains of her tunic. She eased her arm back out of the remaining sleeve, letting the cloth slide down until it hung from her hand. His gaze missed nothing of the curves her thin undershirt revealed, the feminine roundness made more prominent by the slight angularity of collarbone and shoulder.

She held out the top, forcing him to come close again to take it, widening her eyes and holding his with them, establishing a tangible intimacy. A hint of colour touched his cheeks, warming the brown of his eyes, but he said simply, "You may as well give me the pants, too."

Cassiopeia let her hands move to the fastenings, without taking her gaze from his, as if daring him to look down. The pants fell in a crumpled heap on the floor, leaving her clad only in skimpy underwear. She broke the eye contact, glancing down, and stepped back this time, clear of the stained and torn pants, giving him every chance to appreciate her slender thighs and shapely calves.

Miklos gathered up the clothing in an ungainly bundle and spoke to it, as if afraid of looking directly at her. "I'll just put these in the recycler." He turned and started for the farther door, and then, too casually, turned part-way back and asked, "Sure you don't want to turbowash while I'm cleaning these up?"

"That sounds like a lovely idea!" Her voice fairly dripped sweetness. She batted her eyelashes at him coyly. "But alone, it's so...utilitarian, don't you think? Why don't you join me?"

His face was a study in conflicting emotions; glowing enthusiasm warred with sheer consternation. He waved the clothes at her weakly, gulped, "Be right back," and exited through the farther door.

Cassiopeia grinned approvingly to herself, then seriously considered her next move. She walked to the high-backed chair and seated herself gingerly. She'd expected to feel dwarfed, like a child intruding in an adult's place, but the chair was actually a good fit for her. Its size was an illusion, fostered by colour and clever positioning. So the man was vain about his height! She slid one leg over the left arm of the chair, shifting the rest of her weight so she was draped against the chair back.

Miklos reappeared in a new outfit, a shirt-like tunic of royal blue, loose-fitting, which stopped at his knees. Over one arm he carried a garment of pale pink, presumably for her. She stayed in her languorous pose, watching him as he advanced. He stopped just past the end of the couch and stared back at her. She let her gaze slide down in slow appraisal. The calves of his legs were as firmly muscled as his upper body; his feet were long and thin, with a high arch and neatly trimmed nails.

As she raised the level of her gaze, Cassiopeia again noticed the length of those fine-boned hands. She found herself wondering, with warming interest, exactly what the tunic cloaked.

His eyes, when she met them again, held only amused speculation. "Are you

ready?" he asked politely.

"Ready for what?"

"Our turbowash." His smile widened generously.

She brought her leg back with slow grace and shifted her weight forward onto her feet in a movement so carefully even that it seemed a trance-like flow, keeping her eyes pinned to his. She walked slowly toward him, letting her hips sway gracefully, until they were once more face-to-face.

The amusement was gone from his eyes now; sober and intense, they seemed to have taken over his face, deep hollows that held an enticing darkness. Cassiopeia found herself breathing less evenly. Deliberately, she opened her mouth and ran the tip of her tongue over suddenly dry lips.

Miklos made a low noise which he attempted to disguise as a cough, using the motion of turning his head and arm to break the tension. Still not speaking, he led the way to the door and through it.

The room was standard, if well-appointed. A waste cycler stood in functional plainness in one corner; a set of hooks adorned one wall, and another was set with a mirror and a built-in sink. Beyond where the carpet stopped was a stall which looked exactly like a normal turbowash.

He hung the pink garment on one hook, and then, with a curiously speculative look at her, proceeded to pull off his tunic and hang it alongside.

Naked, he was an impressive man. The force of his personality combined with virile proportions to create the sense of presence of a big man. His broad torso narrowed to smooth hips and powerful legs. The old tale about long hands and feet indicating a long sex organ proved only partially true; his was long, more than she'd really expected, but it was also well-rounded, and already quickening in response to her presence.

Cassiopeia could feel a tightening in her loins and a beginning prickle of heat farther down. She took a deep breath, then walked past him to the turbowash. There was a control knob with "ON-OFF" and an arrow for "WARMER" opposite another for "COLDER." It looked identical to any sonic turbowash she'd ever seen.

She turned back to find him standing at the stall door, regarding her quizzically. She smiled, letting a warmth that was only half-feigned colour her face, and eased one strap of her undershirt over her shoulder, letting it drop. Standing very still, she raised the other arm and did the same for the other strap, so the material was now held only by the upthrust of her breasts. A swift tug, and the shirt was on the floor about her feet.

Miklos caught his breath sharply, his eyes devouring the twin mounds and small, dark nipples. His hands, grasping the sides of the stall entrance, tightened visibly, and that long penis stiffened in partial erection. Cassiopeia shoved her panties floorward, eager now to accelerate the pace of this seduction, and stood facing him openly.



He moved convulsively forward, slapping the controls on, and jerked back out of the stall, turning away to the right. In a mix of panic and anger, she dove forward, catching him in an awkward tackle that left them sprawled on the floor, her face against his hip and one shoulder resting against the curved swell of his buttocks. Furiously intent on maintaining the initiative she'd taken, she slid a hand around the narrow hip and across the flat groin, to grasp the length of his maleness in a practiced caress. Measurement by hand confirmed her earlier estimate by eye -- nature had more than made up for his overall stature.

With a strangled moan, Miklos freed himself and turned so he was looking down at her face. "Why don't you take a turbowash?" he groaned.

"Why do you care so much?" Cassiopeia demanded, her honest perplexity written on her face.

He shook his head mutely, then watched in helpless resignation as she pulled herself even with him. His eyes were pools of darkness now, and a hand went out, as if of its own volition, to trace the curve of her shoulder. She leaned in to kiss him, letting only their lips touch, a gentle pressure that increased as she moved her lips, half open now, meeting his, touching them with her tongue in small darts, encouraging the growing response of his mouth. His hand moved up over her breast, cupping it, rubbing the hardening nipple with his thumb.

He swung his mouth from hers to her neck, covering her throat in a flurry of ardent kisses. His hand moved down to the curve of her hip, as his mouth traced a path to her breast. She brought a leg up along his thigh, feeling the tingle of skin rubbing against the soft inside of her calf, and ran a hand from his shoulder over the firm sinews of back muscle to reach the straight cord of spine. She pressed skillfully, easing tightness, even as she felt her body responding to the sensual pleasures of his tongue against her nipple.

His hand moved inward, stroking the inside of her thighs, sliding up against the warm wetness above, seeking the sensitive areas with a cautiously gentle touch. She wriggled lasciviously against his hand, pulling his mouth loose and bringing it back to meet her own in a passionate kiss. She had no need to touch him to tell, but she slid a hand down and stroked his rigid penis, feeling the throbbing vein beneath, inwardly amazed at his size in full erection.

Miklos began to thrust forward, but she held him back with the caressing hand. She slid her lips across his face, nibbled at his ear, and whispered softly, "What's so important about the turbowash?"

He groaned and began to push at her more strongly, but she blew gently in his ear, nibbled again, and whispered her question more urgently.

"Nothing," he replied hoarsely, trying to turn her on her back.

With an abrupt shove of knee and elbow, Cassiopeia freed herself, stood, and skipped agilely back into the turbowash, making sure she turned off the controls as she entered. She braced herself against the back of the stall, waiting, her breath coming in long gasps.

Miklos leaned against the stall door, breathing as irregularly as she, his dark eyes fiery with desire. "You fraking little... You're too beautiful not to be real!" he gasped, stepping into the turbowash and reaching for her. He grasped her waist in both hands and lifted her high above his head, lowering her slowly, so that her body slid down against his, his mouth and tongue moving erotically against her pubis, groin, stomach, and breastbone, until their lips met, and his hardness was pressing against her.

His strong arms held her tightly, while his kisses were increasingly hot and hard with desire. She felt his entry, the muscles of his legs and thighs working as he pressed up into her. She clung tightly to his back for a moment, then reached out blindly with one arm and hit the turbowash controls.

The ordinary wave of warm sonics did nothing to diminish the temperature in the stall.

Cassiopeia was incapable of further experiment. She could only cling to Miklos, using muscles of her own to further increase his pleasure even as his rhythmic rubbing was sending spasms of delight through her own body. The mounting fever of excitement crescendoed in a mindless moment of taut intensity. He held her fiercely, pressing their flesh together a moment longer, before setting her on her feet.

He looked bemusedly at the controls, then gave her a lopsided grin. "Handy that the turbowash is already on," he said in a conversational tone.

"Oh." She reached up and turned the controls off again. "We're nowhere near ready for that yet." She looked up at him with mock-demureness and batted her eyelashes lightly. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me what all the nonsense with the turbowash was about?"

He laughed happily. "I needed to prove you were human."

Cassiopeia looked down at herself, but everything was as definitely female as she remembered. "You needed the turbowash to prove I'm human?"

Miklos reddened and chewed his lip. "The Cylons have androids that seem perfect simulations of humans," he explained soberly. "But the sonic turbowash causes them to blow up."

"So it was a test," she mused. Then she brightened. "I'll have to take a long one, so you'll be really sure, then, won't I? But since you have such an efficient air-recycler, it keeps me so dry I haven't needed one -- yet."

He struggled to keep from laughing, but his dark eyes glowed with enthusiasm as he said, "Perhaps if we adjourned to the bedroom, I could give you some... reason...for taking that turbowash."

"And then you'll answer all my questions?"

"Anything you want to know," he replied eagerly.

"Ahh," Cassiopeia purred. "I'm sure I'm going to enjoy this...turbowash."

* * * * *

Starbuck shook his head sadly. "All that trouble, and their famous defence screen turns out to be based on their crazy double sun system, and not trans-portable!" He raised his glass and drained it.

"Yeah." Apollo looked glumly at his glass. "And my father wasn't too happy about the news that the Cylons're making 'perfect' androids." He drank, and for a moment they sat in silence, alone around a table in the Officers' Club.

Apollo sighed deeply, then stood up. "At least we got everything straightened out in time, and with the GALACTICA's help, the citizens of Nossos are safe behind their screen again." He squared his shoulders, and his eyes brightened a little. "No matter what happens to us, there'll be that pocket of humanity the Cylons can't eradicate." He smiled grimly, then went off to attend a strategy meeting for the GALACTICA's senior officers.

Cassiopeia shifted her chair slightly, so she could see Starbuck's face. "Starbuck," she began nervously, tentatively putting a hand on his arm.

He grinned and laid a hand over hers. "Shame that place was so small. It would've been nice to have a safe place for us, too. And their leaders seemed nice enough. That Miklos guy..."

"Starbuck!" she interrupted, pressing down on his arm. "There's something you should know." She paused, uncertain now that she had his full attention. Taking a deep breath, she continued. "Apollo left a few things out of the official version of, uh, what happened down there."

The blue eyes peering into hers were wide and questioning; the normally happy-go-lucky grin was gone from his mouth. She braced herself and said, "To convince Miklos I was human, I had to...practice...some of my old arts."

"Oh." Starbuck looked relieved. "That's understandable, Cass."

"I don't think you understand," Cassiopeia went on, determined to keep things honest between them. "I don't mean just curing headaches or giving a back-rub. I mean I... I seduced him." She looked anxiously at Starbuck, afraid she'd see rejection there.

Starbuck grinned reassuringly. "I understand. Really. Sometimes the circumstances require you to do things that, uh, you really shouldn't." He waved a hand vaguely.

Now it was Cassiopeia's turn to look questioning. "How do you know?" she asked suspiciously.

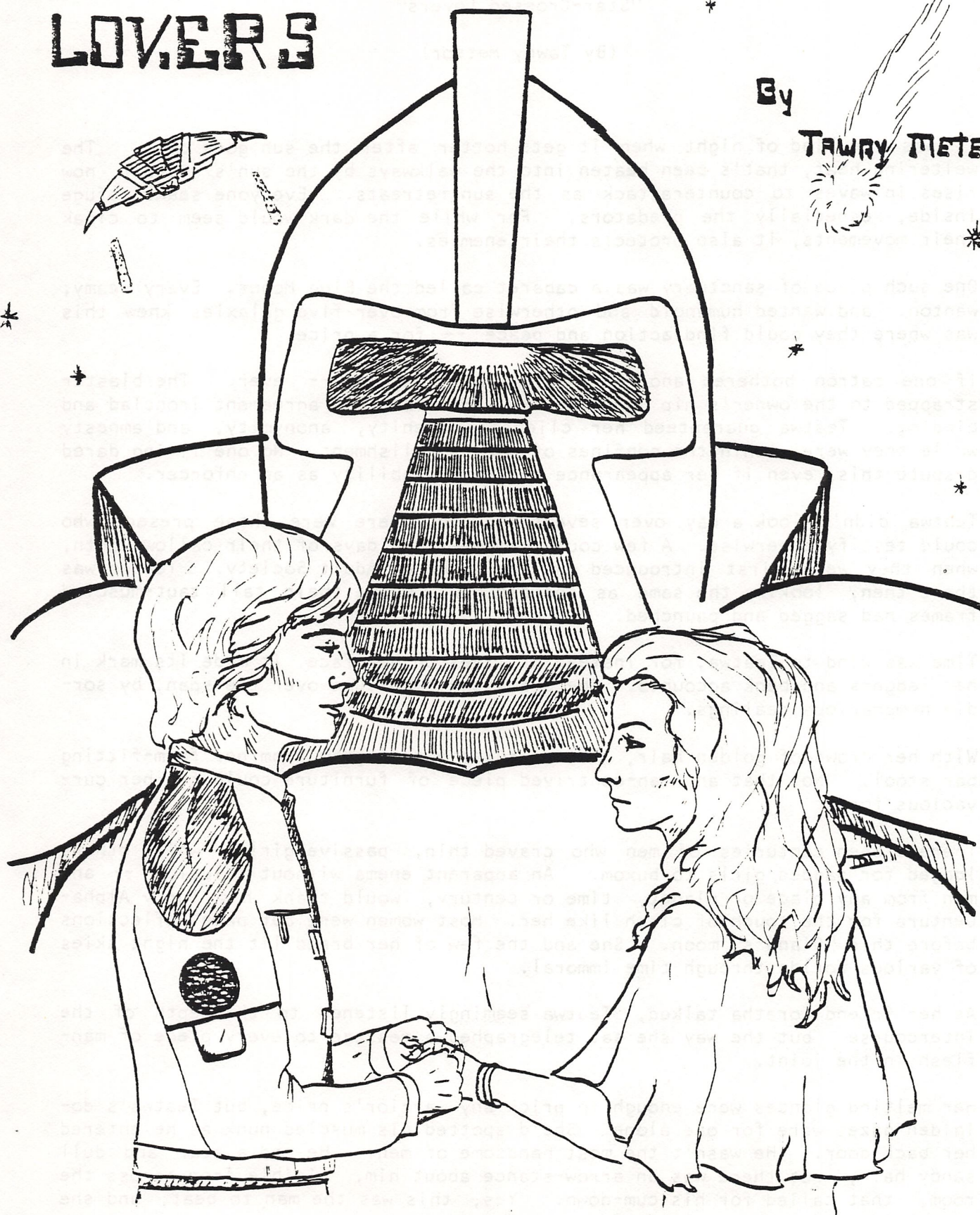
"Oh..." Starbuck opened his mouth, then closed it again and gave her a weak grin. "That's a long story. You don't really want to hear it now." He grinned again, more confidently. "I'll tell you all about it sometime."

Cassiopeia smiled back, a shade too sweetly. "Yes," she said. "And I'll be waiting."

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

By

TAWNY METEOR



"Star-Crossed Lovers"

(By Tawny Meteor)

It was the kind of night when it gets hotter after the sun goes down. The weltering heat, that's been beaten into the walkways by the sun's assault, now rises in waves to counterattack as the sun retreats. Everyone seeks refuge inside, especially the predators. For while the dark would seem to cloak their movements, it also protects their enemies.

One such place of sanctuary was a cabaret called the Blue Moons. Every seamy, wanton, and wanted humanoid and otherwise from over five galaxies knew this was where they could find action and peace -- for a price.

If one patron bothered another, he wouldn't again -- ever. The blaster strapped to the owner's hip was the seal that made any agreement ironclad and binding. Teatwa guaranteed her clientele amenity, anonymity, and amnesty while they were within the confines of her establishment. No one living dared dispute this, even if her appearance belied her ability as an enforcer.

Teatwa didn't look a day over seventeen, but there were whose present who could testify otherwise. A few could remember the days of their callow youth, when they were first introduced to the ways of Adult Society. Teatwa was there then, looking the same as she did now, while their tall taut-muscled frames had sagged and paunched.

Time was kind to Teatwa, for instead of lines on her face, it made its mark in her ledgers and bank accounts. She'd amassed a fortune over the span, by sordid nympharious dealings.

With her crown of golden hair, Teatwa ruled her kingdom from her form-fitting bar stool. Not that any man-contrived piece of furniture could fit her curvaceous form.

There'd been centuries of men who craved thin, passive girls, while others longed for padded girls to buxom. An apparent enema without solution -- any man from any place or planet, time or century, would thank his lucky Alpha-Centura for the touch of clash like her. Most women were but pale reflections before this "Diana's" moon. She and the few of her breed lit the night skies of various worlds through time immoral.

As her friend Loretha talked, Teatwa seemingly listened to the depth of the intercourse, but the way she sat telegraphed a message to every piece of man-flesh in the joint.

Her melting glances were enough to prick any warrior's pride, but Teatwa's do-laiden gazes were for one alone. She'd spotted his muscled hunk as he entered her back door. He wasn't the most handsome of men. He had a scar and dull sandy hair, but there was an arrow-stance about him, visible from across the room, that called for his cum-down. Yes, this was the man to beat, and she knew he'd never see the like of her go down.

Loretha at last was reaching a climax.

"I'd like advice... I mean, well, I...you know..." Loretha said haltingly.

"If you are asking me about sex, dear," quipped Teatwa lustily, "I know what your problem is. Your inhibitions keep you all tied-up in knots."

"It isn't that I don't enjoy all the ups and downs life has to offer," ventured Loretha guiltily. "It's the jerks I meet with."

"Yes, I know you have a well developed sense of social consciousness, but perhaps you could try to be obscene and not heard," said Teatwa quietly.

"It's just that I'm sick of men who think a girl can be had for a song."

"Well, that all depends on the man's pitch, doesn't it? Granted it's usually a beaver-pitch."

"I admit some can play a pretty tune on the organ, but most are just a swell-headed lot," Loretha intoned. "Why does a man always feel the need to insert his masculinity?"

"Ah, men!" said Teatwa. "But in all fairness, it is important that a man have drive, or he will become inscrewtable. Why must you always repulse men's advances? Advancing men's pulses is much more stimulating and to the point. Just remember that the bigger men come, the harder they ball."

"That's what I don't want."

"Then you can't just go so far and no fervour. If you lead a man on wile, you can expect ball-room dancing to end in floor play. Now, dear, try to keep a stiff upper hip and have a little cum-passion for men. Some day, you will find that loves labours cost, if you keep teasing."

"I'm still waiting for the right man," lamented Loretha. "Even when you think you have the man right where you want him, he comes and then goes. Or, worse, some girl opens your male up to take advantage of her suggestions. The next girl that does, I'm going to terrorise out! A good girl can't just rely on a man to be true-blew and thrust worthy. Now, can she?"

"I'll let you know. There's a target across the room, and I'm aiming for the bull. I'll see you later, Loretha," said Teatwa as she sensuously climbed down from the stool, putting her best attitude forward.

As an afterthought, she stretched leisurely back toward Loretha and added, "Don't expect any snap decisions on my part. Even if my mother was a calculator, my father used contraceptives to rubber the wrong way. She took a shot with her unloaded finger and gave a wink for good measure."

All this while, Starbuns had been aware of Teatwa's presence across the crowded room. Now that she was weaving her way through the room, greeting patrons, he was finding it hard to keep his part up while in an animated conversation with the guys.

"I don't believe in love, it's just a disease of the nymph glands," Kerns said.

"You cynic," said Darek. "It's bed her to have love than lust. It's what gives meaning to life."

They noticed the bird climb down from her perch, allowing them to catch sight of the bush. She became the topic of conversation, rather than just sex in general. Now Starbuns would be able to hold his own.

"That Teatwa is a number, isn't she, Starbuns? I wouldn't mind counting that one up on my fingers," said Kerns, elbowing Starbuns.

But, before he could answer, Darek said, "Just like a geometrist, always thinking about bisexing angels."

Sweeping into the conversation and taking an untidy crack, Starbuns said, "Don't confuse her with the common women of the ringed planet Slattern you come from, Kerns."

"It doesn't matter where a woman comes from. As long as she has curves, you can bet she knows all the angles," replied Kerns. "Your problem is you think of every woman as your own personal passion fancy, and not just a passing fanny," he added with malice.

Judiciously, Darek interceded to avert an argument. "Cut it out, and slice a piece of advice from the loose-life analogue book of Laidtorest Long -- 'Don't judge a hooker by her cover,'" he said.

"With so little cover, there's obviously no fable of contents," said Bren, who had previously remained silent.

"There are certainly no falsies to enhancer maiden's pair," observed Darek.

"I don't know if she was ever little, but she certainly is a beguile now," Kerns said.

"Hey, Starbuns, which are you, a breast or a leg man?" asked Bren, who then somewhat chickenly added, "They say the breast things in life are free."

"I prefer white meat, but I must admit I like the whole thing," answered Starbuns.

"No wonder you suffer from asphyxiation," Bren said.

They all stood there laughing.

"I think she's coming this way," said Darek.

"I think I'll cut the maid's head off," said Starbuns slicingly, as he decided whether or not to intersex her path.

"The head of the made?" Bren asked.

"Sure, or her maidenhead. Take it in any sense you will," replied Starbuns.

"She'd take it in the sense. She'd feel it," said Kerns, laughing. "Maybe!"

"I can feel as long as I can stand, and I stand long," said Starbuns.

"You just think that, because you come from a heavy gravity world, you can make every broad jump," answered Kerns testily.

"Laugh if you like, but my father said, 'My son, there's music in the stars that causes a belle to peel. If you can remember that seduction is the art of genital persuasion, and a great lover nos all the erroneous zones, you'll manage to stay on top of the heap.' Well, boys, I've never forgotten," Starbuns said.

"Well, for all your fine words, Starbuns, I think you have an add-a-puss complex just like the rest of us," said Kerns.

"I believe in getting my point across without stabbing someone with it, but..." Starbuns began.

"Pity," said Teatwa, hearing the last part of his speech as she approached. "I'd looked forward to it so," she cooed.

"I'm Starbuns, Miss," he said, making his move. He could see his competition would be stiff.

"Yes, you are, aren't you? What's a handsome buck like you doing in a place like this? How many points do I get if I bag your head? Never mind, don't answer. I prefer surprises. 'Miss' is so formal, and I don't really miss out on anything. Teatwa's my name, but why don't you call me Sugar-Teat, all my bust friends dew," said Teatwa tartly.

Before Starbuns could recover from her verbal barrage, Teatwa put her hand through his arm and began to lead him away from his cronies. They took several steps without a word. Starbuns hadn't yet recovered from shock. He hadn't anticipated being her game -- quite the opposite.

Teatwa turned toward him. She stood so close he could smell her scent wafting from the cleavage of her low-cut bodice.

"You have the look of a whirled traveller about you," said Teatwa.

Starbuns was intoxicated by her nearness, but managed to say, "I'm not an astronaut, if that's what you mean -- but I have been around." He smiled, pleased with himself.

They stood for a long time, sizing each other up.

"Shall we go upstairs?" Teatwa asked, breaking the pregnant pause.

"You lead, and I'll follow."

"Let's get one thing straight between us, Buns. If I may call you that for

short?" she said, playing with him. "I expect my men to take the lead."

"You won't call me short for long," replied Starbuns, regaining control of the situation. "You'd better call me Star, because that's where your head will be when I'm through."

"Don't be too cocksure there, mister."

"It's the one thing I am sure of!" he answered.

"We'll see," asserted Teatwa, continuing to make her way through the cluttered tables and chairs of the darkened room. Her hips swayed in time with the



sultry song the torch singer was belting out.

The refrain -- "Let me die in filling depths..." -- trailed off behind them as they mounted the steps.

* * * * *

They'd been in Teatwa's sumptuous cubicle for some time, observing the social amenities of small talk and drinks. The tension was rising to an unbearable level when Starbuns brought the conversation transparently forward. "Why don't you put on a negligee and get comfortable?"

"I'm more comfortable in the nude," replied Teatwa, nakedly blunt. She'd decided to take the bull by the horns.

Starbuns stepped forward to call her bluff. With great aplomb and one finger, he unfastened the clasp that a moment before held Teatwa's garment clingingly to her form. It dropped in a soft cloud at her feet.

What Starbuns saw before him took his breath away. The peeling was mutual. He was still in a daze as Teatwa deftly removed his clothes. She then stood back, wide-eyed and appreciative.

"I'll bet you never let your blast-her go off half-cocked," she said shyly.

The abrupt change in her character wasn't enough to put Starbuns off his stride, as it might a less experienced warrior. "I believe in around-the-cock service," he said, not to be undone. In a brain-storm he added, "You undressed me almost professionally, are you a socialator?"

Ignoring the obviously intended dig, Teatwa said, "I can be very social, but I never cum late or for a price. I find pleasure is its own reward."

It was no more than a heartbeat until their hot and steamy bodies were pressed together in a mangled iron grip. Passion swelled in Starbuns as he pulled Teatwa to the floor, her bare skin on the rug. He had a desire to blow her to Kingdom-come. He dove into the copper fuzz that guarded the vault of her cell. He took sanctuary, tongue in chick.

He was a great swordsman, and a cunning linguist. She parried his sword thrust for thrust. It was a close encounter, alien to all he'd come to expect.

"My Star," said Teatwa.

"Your wish is my command," Starbuns responded, covering her in kisses.

"No, dear, by your command."

A thought burned in Starbuns' mind. Could it possibly be that her voluptuous, mechanically perfect form could be a new guise for an insidious Cylex?

Nonsense! He was no rank amateur at such things. He could tell flesh and blood from the blow-up, anatomically correct robutrix aboard the EROTICA, so

He would surely know a Cylex when he touched one. He settled his head back to Teatwa's breast. She was a very well-rounded person, to have studied and mastered the Camelsutra. It was a big hump to overcome.

From her glistening gold lips on down, she was the gilt-edged negotiable blonde he'd been waiting for.

In the darkened room, the single red tracer light behind the one-way mirror was almost visible. Starbuns didn't see it, for he was deep in peaceful slumber.

Teatwa knew now that what her mother said about hotpants being cuntscrewed as britches of promise was true.

She got up from the bed.

Starbuns stirred and mumbled.

"Never mind, dear, don't get up, I'll be back with you in two sex," she said. "Then, when I get back, we can get it up together."

"A little fore play, hunh?" he asked, waking up.

"I think three will be quite enough," said Teatwa, stepping to the wall panel behind the mirror and unlatching a hidden lock.

A tall, menacing, metallic figure loomed over them and the bed. Starbuns reached for his blaster where it should have been. It wasn't there. He knew he was a dead man.

The Cylex grabbed him by both shoulders and raised him. It clutched his naked body to the cold metal of its own, in an obvious death grip.

"Long time no see, Starbuns," said the Cylex.

Pulling himself back, dazed, Starbuns yelled happily, "Cy!" He shook his head as if in a dream. "Cy? Why, you old bucket of bolts! It's great to see you!"

Then something became clear. He turned to Teatwa and asked accusingly, "What does this mean?"

"Cy and I have been friends a long time. We were sitting around swapping tall tales and fantasies, and, well, one thing led to another. He found out you were on planet, so he sent me to find you. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw you come in my own place."

"So, a happy reunion, that's the only purpose?"

"Well, no, actually... Can't you guess?" asked Teatwa.

"A man, a maid, and a man made... A game of chess?"

"I think we can manage a trois."



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